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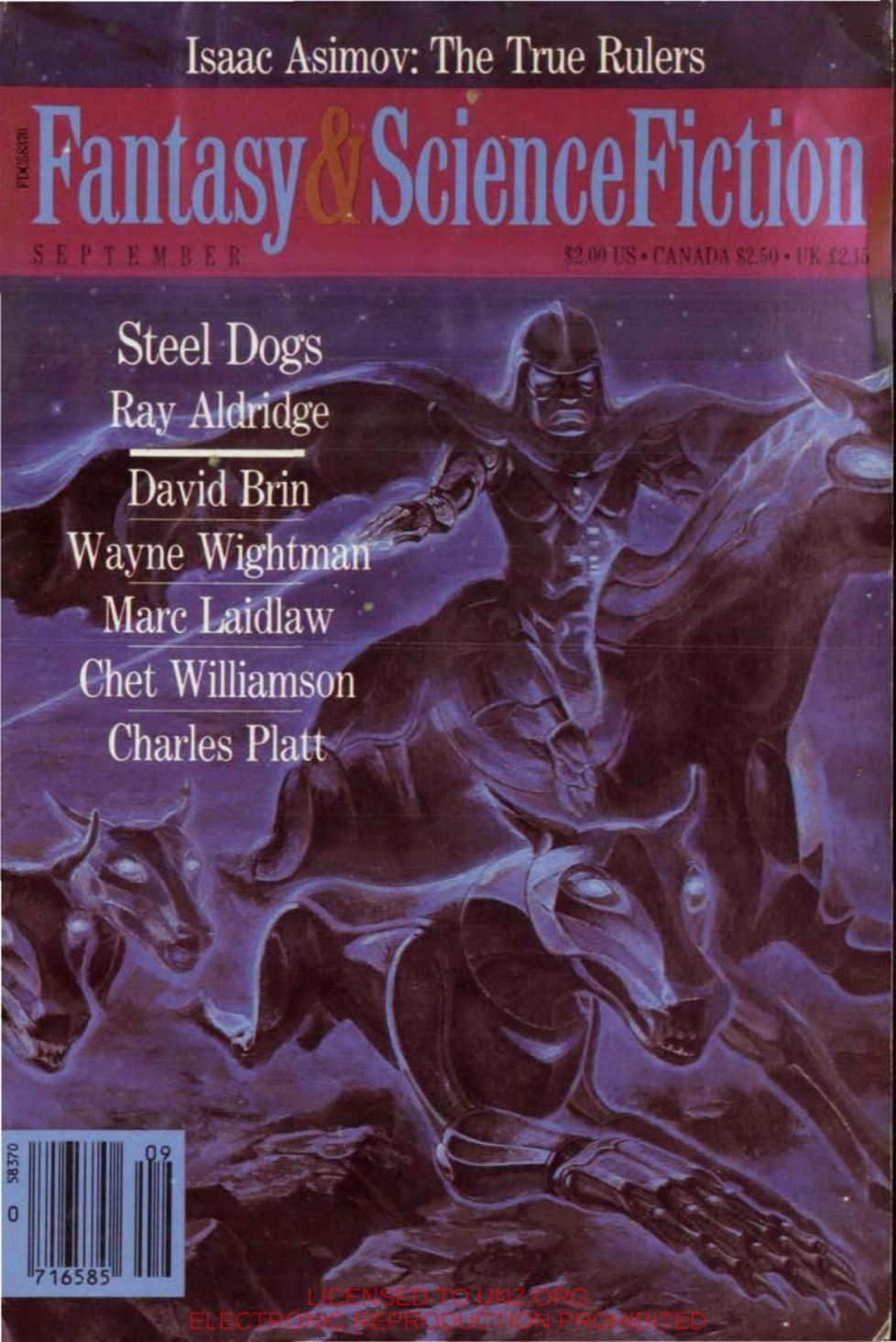

Steel Dogs
Ray Aldridge

David Brin
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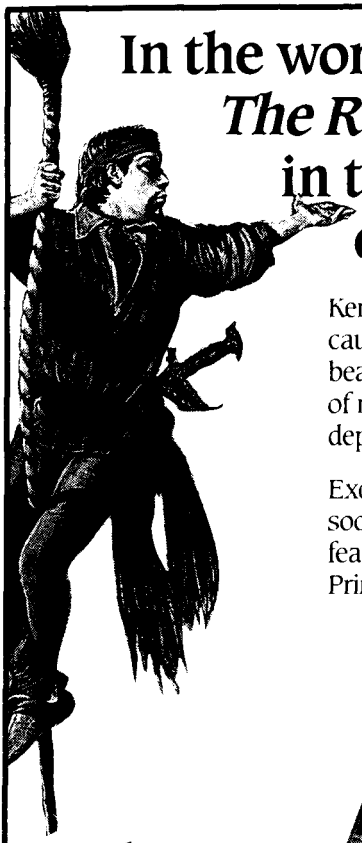

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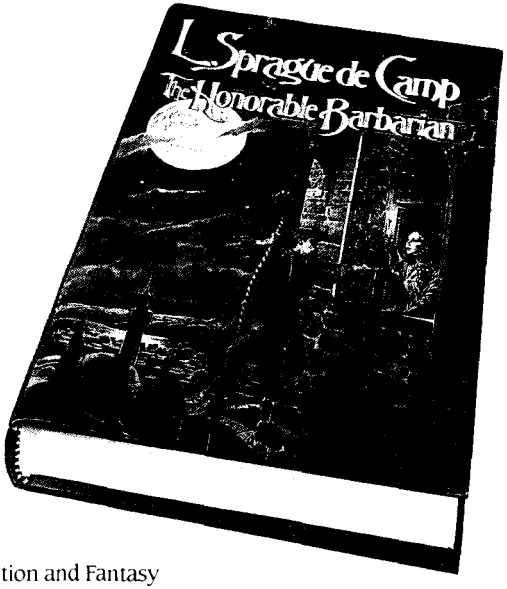

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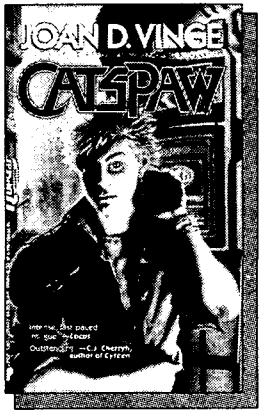

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A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen

What's so special?

Well, I think a new book by an award-winning author is quite special, and this month Questar is proud to present CATSPAW by Joan D. Vinge, one of our favorite award-winning authors.

Then again, a first novel is also very special: it marks the beginning of a promising new career in the field of science fiction. And guess what? TANGLED WEBS, this month's second Questar title, is a first novel.

But we don't have to single out certain books on our list as being "special." Because when it comes right down to it, all Questar books are special.

When you see me around, ask me about Melinda Snodgrass (she's kinda special too).

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They came together from two worlds
in eternal opposition...
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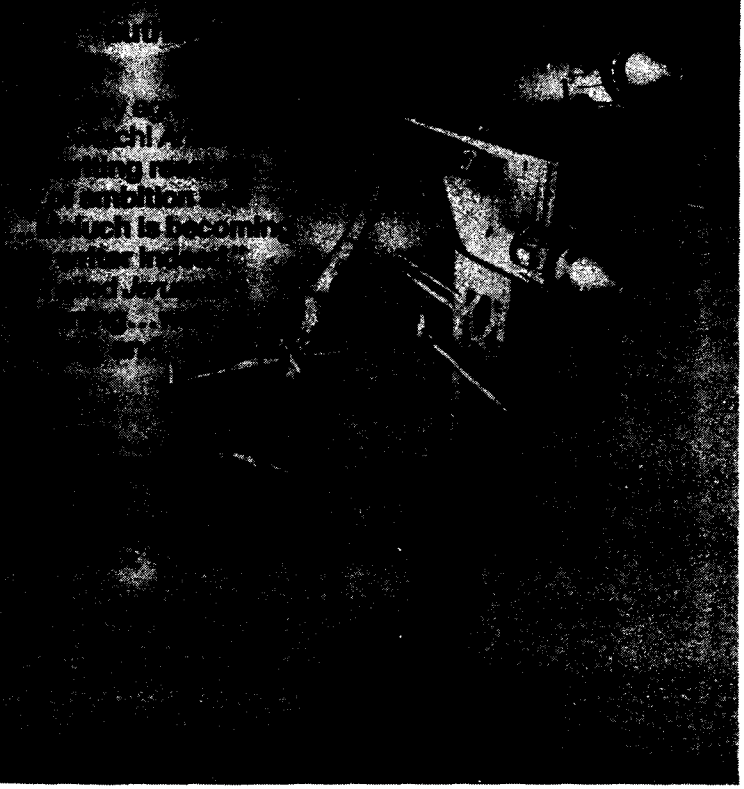
War Birds



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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

Including VENTURE SCIENCE FICTION

SEPTEMBER • 40th Year of Publication

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Ray Aldridge, one of the most inventive new writers in SF, offers his longest and strongest story to date, about an abandoned resort planet controlled by ghostly machines and a young woman who falls into the hands of a steel huntsman and his dogs.

STEEL DOGS

By Ray Aldridge

AANDRED WAITED IN the egress lock, jammed in with the horse and the dogs. In that small place, the air was dense with the stinks of machine oil and ozone and hydraulic fluid. The dogs were excited, and their bodies clashed together, metal against metal, making a thunderous din. "Calm down, puppies," Aandred said, making his harsh voice soothing. "Droam's a little slower than usual tonight, I know, I know, but soon, soon...." The dogs quieted, waiting with only an occasional wriggle of eagerness, a muffled whimper.

Aandred flipped open the panel set into his forearm, studied the tell-tales there. All burned a steady green, except for an occasional amber flicker on the one that monitored Umber's olfactory transducer. *Not bad enough to make Umber stay behind,* he thought. Umber was a sweet puppy, not contentious; she would stay with the pack even if her nose failed her completely.

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Droam spoke, using the direct mode. "Ready, Huntsman?" Aandred hated the sound of the castle's voice in his head; it was an intrusion, a reminder that he was Droam's property. Tonight the voice was a shade less unctuous than usual. Aandred imagined a quiver of apprehension in its smooth tones. *Good,* he thought. *Suffer, monster. Be afraid.* But all he said was, "Yes."

Aandred mounted his horse, a hulk beautifully fashioned of black steel. He latched himself into the saddle, snapping down the levers, locking the armored cables into their channels. The dogs surged with excitement, and the horse shied. Aandred reached out, crashed his fist against the back of its head. Sparks flew, but the horse quieted. "Idiot," Aandred muttered. The horse was the revenant of a supposedly noble animal, but if he rode it every night for another seven hundred years, he would still dislike it. And it would never love him; unlike the dogs, it was either too stupid or too aloof to form such attachments.

Over the sally gate's lintel, the ready light went to amber, then to green. The gate slammed open. The Hunt boiled out into the starlight, the dogs belling, clattering against each other. The sound was deafening for a moment, until the dogs began to string out along the grassy track that led down into the Green Places. Aandred glanced back at Droam; the castle loomed huge and gray against the stars, its thousand twisted towers like spines on an angry hedgehog's back. For a moment, Aandred's vision grew dim, such was the force of his hatred. He shuddered, wrenched himself straight in the saddle, and gave his attention to the Hunt.

Aandred did not love the horse, but he still loved to ride. His death and revenancy seven hundred years before had narrowed the range of his pleasures, and time had worn away much of what was left, but this was still good. To pound along in the wake of a dozen dogs under the black sky, the cool wind of his passage blowing back the metallic strands of his hair and billowing his great cape, the ground whipping past, the eager sounds of the pack filling his ears . . . it was still good. He might have laughed, but his laughter was a mad roar, suitable to the Master of the Hunt. It no longer pleased him.

Droam's voice filled his head again. "Down to the windward beach, Aandred. That's where the troll saw them come ashore."

Aandred touched the pommel of his saddle, and Crimson, the pack leader, veered off onto the trail that led down to the sea. The trail trav-

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ersed a crumbling bluff, frequently disappearing in washouts. The Hunt leaped the gaps with reckless abandon. Aandred delighted in the risk. Should the horse fail to keep its footing, sharp rocks waited in the surf below; the fall was great enough to burst open even Aandred's metal body. He shouted with pleasure, but then he thought of the dogs, and his pleasure evaporated, replaced by concern. He touched the pommel again, and Crimson slowed, ran more carefully. "Good dog," Aandred whispered.

When they reached the hard sand at the foot of the cliff, he let the dogs stretch again, and they sent up a fierce baying. The Hunt thundered north on the narrow beach; the red moon rose over the Sea of Islands.

Aandred had almost forgotten his purpose, when Droam spoke again. "Listen — here are your instructions, Aandred," the castle said. "Kill them all, except for one. Keep one alive, for me to question."

Aandred frowned. "What weapons will they have?" he asked, thinking of the dogs. He wondered why it had not occurred to him to ask before. *I've been dead too long,* he thought.

"Nothing for you to be concerned about. No energy weapons, no high explosives. They won't have had time to dig traps, rig deadfalls. A simple job; see that you make no mistakes."

Aandred ground his chromed teeth together. Droam's arrogance still enraged him, even after all the years. It was a remarkable phenomenon, when he thought how pale most of the other emotions had grown for him. Still, he did Droam's bidding, he muted the belling of the pack, and adjusted the horse so that it ran on muffling cushions of air. The night went silent.

When they reached the place where the prey had come from the sea, the dogs swirled around the base of the cliff like a steel wave. They quickly found the cave where the boat was hidden, and dragged the craft out into the starlight, snapping and tearing. In moments, it was a tangle of splinters. Aandred was a little sorry. In his time as a man, he had been pleasurably acquainted with boats, and this one had seemed a well-made, graceful one.

The dogs caught the scent, raced down the beach to a place where a small waterfall spilled through the branches of a dead juniper. Here the cliff was divided by a gully that reached back into the headland. The dogs swarmed up the narrow defile; with a great bound, the horse carried Aandred after them.

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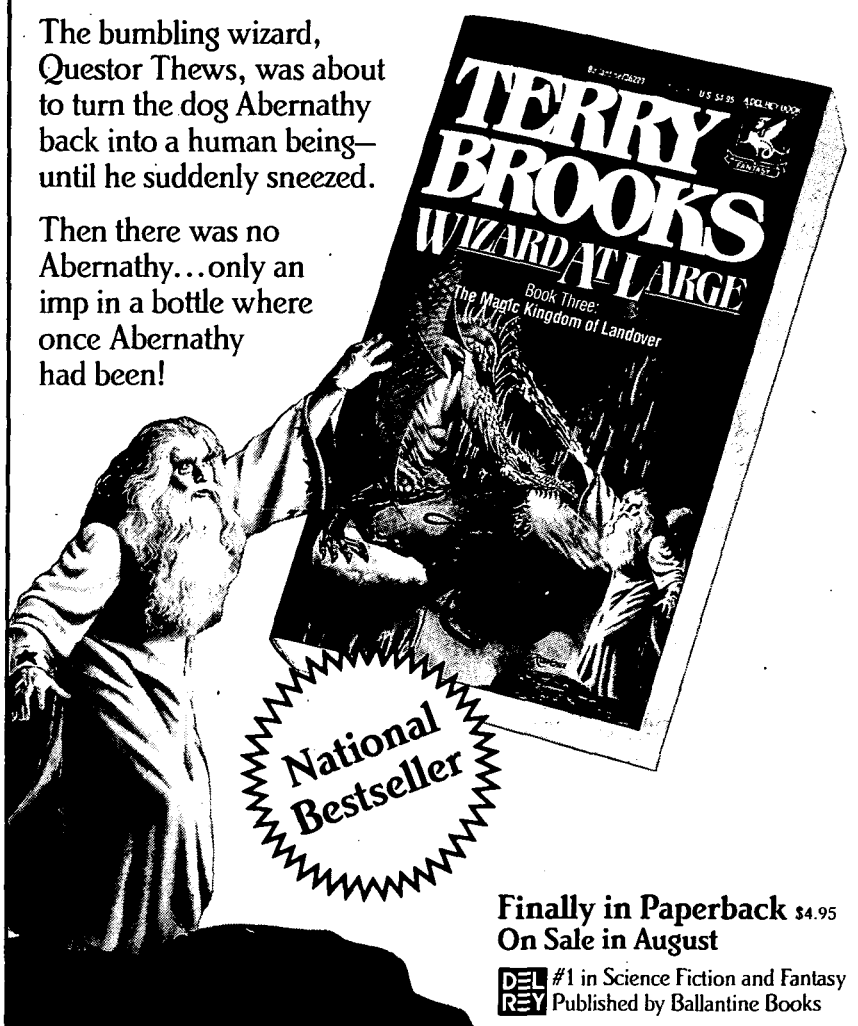

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The darkness in the gully was dense, and Aandred lowered his visual range into the infrared. The dogs became churning red swirls in the blackness; their exhaust louvers glowed brightly. He considered his instructions. When they came upon the prey, he must act instantly, or Droam wouldn't get its prisoner. The dogs were enthusiastic; they often broke teeth on the armored flanks of the revenant stags that were their customary prey. Flesh and bone were so soft, in comparison.

They reached the top of the gully and broke out onto an open heath. A quarter mile away loomed the edge of the Dimlorn Woods.

Aandred slowed the dogs again, fed a little more power to the horse. When he had drawn even with Crimson, he glanced aside at the pack leader. Crimson rolled a puzzled eye at him, seemed to be asking a silent question.

"Sorry, puppy," Aandred whispered. "Just this once."

Aandred reached the edge of the trees fifty meters ahead of the dogs. He charged along the dim path, and seconds later reached the clearing where the prey was camped. He burst through the briars that hedged the open space, and half a dozen of the Bonepickers turned at the sound. They'd sheltered under a low-hanging black willow, except for the one who stood guard in the middle of the clearing. That one, a tall, thin man, leveled a crossbow at Aandred and fired.

The bolt hit his cheek and sang away into the trees. Aandred roared with pain; the bolt had left no more than a shiny nick in the metal, but the metal was thickly impregnated with pseudonerve endings. He felt as if his cheek had been torn open; he twitched the reins and rode the man down.

When Aandred had passed, the guard was a bloody tatter, tumbling in his wake.

The others still moved slowly: three of them crawling for the concealment of the trees, two of them still sitting stupidly under the willow. Only one had gained her feet, a woman dressed in ragged fringes. Instead of fleeing, she started forward, swinging some sort of club at Aandred. Because she was most convenient, he veered in her direction. The club glanced harmlessly from the shoulder of the horse, and in the next instant, Aandred scooped her up and rode crashing into the black willow. The two slowest Pickers died then, as the horse pranced and stamped, disengaging itself from the tree.

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The dogs arrived, still silent, pouring through the clearing. The horse reared in startlement, and Aandred nearly dropped the woman into the pack. Perversely, she squirmed and twisted. His metal hands tightened. She gasped and became very still. "Good," he whispered, backing the horse away from the willow. "Droam doesn't need you healthy, just alive."

As he spoke, the dogs found the remaining Pickers, and brief screams came from the darkness under the trees. It was over in a moment, and the dogs came trotting back into the clearing, their muzzles dripping black in the starlight.

The horse danced sideways, its hooves plopping unpleasantly through the guard's remains, and the woman sobbed once, a brief, shocking sound. Aandred administered another monitory blow to the back of the horse's head. "Cursed creature," he muttered; then he wheeled and rode back out of the Dimlorn Woods, leaving the mess for the trolls to clean up. Long years had passed since their last real manroast. There would be no guests to taste the meat, but the trolls would enjoy the ritual. He supposed they would be grateful.

He would find their gratitude odious. Of all revenants that haunted Castle Droam, the trolls seemed to have sunk the deepest into their ugly souls.

OUT ON the heath, he took the trail that led along the clifftop. The dogs were relaxed now; they cavorted, barked, nipped playfully at each other. Aandred enjoyed their pleasure. He reined in for a moment, looked out at the fairy pavilion that perched on the craggy seastack a hundred meters offshore. A spidery bridge arced gracefully out to the pavilion. Tiny lights sparkled its length, a pretty sight. The black water that swirled beneath the bridge hid the sea troll who had seen the Bonepickers land their boat.

The woman lying across his saddlebow stirred. He noticed that she had a narrow, muscular waist, under the rags. She still had not spoken a word. He wondered if she were capable of speech. If so, surely she would wish to curse him. He shrugged, cantered on.

She was still silent when the Hunt returned up the long, grassy hill below Droam. The gate flew open before they reached it, and the dogs streamed inside. Aandred followed more sedately. His captive chose that moment to renew her struggles. He gave her a shake as he passed within,

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and she went limp. He felt a distant apprehension; Droam would be severe with him if the woman died before the castle could put her to the question.

Then he had a vivid vision of what she must have felt, approaching the gate — the dark fanged maw of Droam, opening to swallow her forever. He shook his head. *Foolishness,* he thought. *Perhaps I grow decrepit; perhaps I'll wear out someday, after all.*

The dogs followed as he carried her up to Droam's audience hall. Droam would have preferred that he leave the dogs in their kennels. He took them partly to prickle Droam, but mostly because the dogs spent far too much time in the kennels. They took such pleasure in being allowed to accompany him. And they were well-behaved; they could not foul the shining corridors, after all, nor would they frighten any guests. No guests had come to Droam in four hundred years.

The dogs might frighten the other revenants who haunted the castle, but Aandred did not care about *them.*

The woman's body was rigid, but she kept her eyes shut. "You might as well see," he said. "Why go to your end in darkness?"

Her eyes opened. They were wide and green, wild with hate and grief, and Aandred wished he had not spoken. An unpleasant emotion seeped into him. He came to an abrupt stop, and the dogs pressed against his legs, confused. What was he feeling? The emotion was one he had felt too long ago to identify now. Was this guilt? Pity? *Absurd,* he thought, and strode on.

On the second landing of the broad staircase that led from the Silver Ballroom to Droam's audience hall, he met Merm the Troll King.

Merm pressed back against the rubyglass wall, watching the dogs with a trace of apprehension. Merm wore a particularly ugly hulk: broad and squat, with skin of warty gray-green plastic, a pointed head, and small, doughy features. His mouth was loose and red, and he peered at Aandred's burden with glittering eyes. "Meat for the fires, eh?" Merm asked.

Aandred felt a vast distaste. He choked back a reply as he passed; what was the point? Merm was as he was.

Merm made as if to follow, but the dogs, sensing their master's animosity, turned and showed bloody teeth to the troll. Merm turned away, but not before Aandred saw the hatred in his face.

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We all hate each other, he thought. *And why not! We are all hateful creatures here.*

At the top of the stairs, three elfish women blocked his way. Their hulks seemed carved from gemstone — translucent, but in some clever manner hiding the machinery within, so that the rich light of the chandeliers glowed through them. They glittered like cold, extravagant jewels, and that was how they saw themselves. Despite this appearance, their crystal skins were soft and warm to touch. He knew this because he had touched each of them more times than he could remember. Droam permitted its devices certain pleasure, as reward for efficient functioning.

"Look!" cried Amethyst, pointing with a slim, elegant finger. "A fleshwoman! Where did you find her? What will you do with her? Does Droam know? You naughty thing."

"Ooh," shrieked Citrine. "Be careful, Aandred. Your equipment will rust off, if you're not careful where you put it. After, come to me. I have an oilcan for you — you know where."

Garnet was the least frivolous of the three. "Disgusting," she said. She stepped close, pushed the Bonepicker's tangled black hair aside, looked at the white face. "She's not ugly, for a fact. When Droam is done with her, give her to us for a time. Before you give her to the trolls. We'll dress her as a guest; we'll practice our pleasing. It will be amusing — like old times, before Droam became unfashionable." Her dark, lovely face glowed with a hunger too ancient to ever be satisfied.

Aandred pushed past them without speaking, though the dogs snarled and whined. He heard their laughter, like horrid little silver bells, as he carried the woman through heavy doors of burnished metal, into the audience room.

At the midpoint of the tall, narrow hall, a circular pit glowed — Droam's prime logic nexus. At the far end, intricately colored windows flanked a platform. There the King-Under-the-Hill slouched on its throne under a patina of cobwebs and dust. Of all the hulks in Droam, this one alone carried no revenant personality; this was the voice of Droam. Formerly, Droam would take possession of the hulk each night and go down to the banquet hall to dine with its most important guests. There it would press the flesh, sample the cuisine, make witty conversation, ensure that each guest was luxuriously satisfied, and in general promote the smooth functioning of the castle. But now Droam had no reason to use the hulk,

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and Aandred was surprised when it stood and stepped down from the platform. In a moment, repellor fields had cleansed it of the detritus of years.

The hulk was built in the shape of an elfish god; it was the most beautiful object in Droam. Its skin was a lambent silver, washed with a haze of gold, sparkled with a million tiny lights, as if covered with minute scales. It wore stately garments, gray silk and white linen, trimmed with the glossy crimson fur of the spotted seaweasel. Its eyes were magenta coals, and its perfect features were quirked in slight annoyance. "Must you take your animals everywhere?" The voice was sweet and smooth.

"It does no harm." Aandred hated the defensive sound in his voice. Droam could at its whim punish its possessions with searing pain, more terrible than anything Aandred had felt as a man.

"Perhaps. Still, they distract me, with their fidgeting, their scratching, their snuffling. Take them out, but first give me the Picker. When you've put them out, come back, and we'll get to our business."

Aandred held out the woman; the glorious hulk took her in careless arms. Her eyes stared from one to the other, huge. Aandred turned away, whistled to the dogs. Outside, he motioned, and they clanked to the floor. "Stay," he ordered, and pulled the great doors shut.

As he walked back up the hall, he glanced down into the logic nexus. Hot light boiled there, along the tangled web of macromolecules that held Droam's intellect. He wished briefly for a snall burnbomb; immediately suppressed the thought. It did no good to dream.

Arriving at the throne, he looked at the hulk's beautiful face, and was thankful that his own coarse features were fixed in a permanent mask of mad enthusiasm. Droam would react vindictively, should it ever detect his murderous inclinations.

"Bring the probe," Droam instructed. The Picker was struggling feebly; Droam took no notice.

Aandred fetched the probe from behind the screen of silver lace. The machine was dusty, but it sprang to life when he opened its master touch-panel. Myriad telltales glowed on the black surface, the visualizer displayed the ready signal, and the restraint chair opened like a skeletal flower to receive the woman. She whimpered, sobbed, but did not plead. He helped Droam clamp her in securely, then stood back.

While Droam fussed with the machine, establishing baselines for its

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investigations, Aandred remembered. In times past, a guest might attempt to depart the island without settling his bill. If the guest were of no great importance or influence, Droam would order Aandred to bring the guest here, where Droam would use the probe to uncover sufficient of the guest's assets to satisfy his account. Ah, those were the days, when Aandred still maintained the illusion that his revenancy served some meaningful purpose. *How foolish of me,* he thought blackly. *Dead is dead.*

The woman's eyes went dreamy; her taut face relaxed. The visualizer bloomed with dark shapes; remembered sensations floated from the empathic emanator, sinking into Aandred's mind.

. . . a muffled thunder from the edge of the woods. A crashing, then the emergence of a nightmare shape, too terrible to grasp. A monstrous man-shape on a huge black horse . . . the eyes of the horse: yellow fire. Jebaum fires his crossbow; the monster roars, an ear-hurting sound, and smashes Jebaum to rags. Kill it, kill it, the hateful thing, rage red as blood. An impact, befuddlement, suspension, a sight more terrible yet. Skeletal dog-things, gleaming metal in the night, swarming across the clearing, bounding with a hideous vitality, jaws snapping, eyes burning bright. . . .

Aandred turned away, and Droam made a fretful sound, slapped at the touchboard. "Effective, Huntsman," Droam said. "But irrelevant, now, to my needs."

Droam tapped the telltales, and the pattern twinkled, shifted.

. . . the warm, sweet scent of Mother's breasts. A viewpoint of such golden clarity, such liquid focus, as to be unmistakably that of a very young child. A caress from Mother's hand, a soft murmur, the touch of sunlight on new skin. A crowing laugh. . . .

Droam tried again.

. . . a summer night, dense with the smell of the sea. Darkness on the beach, small festival fires glowing in the distance. Running over the white dunes with Mondeaux in pursuit. His hands when he caught her, hard from his work with the nets, gentle where they touched her. His breath, spicy with wine and desire. The hammering of her heart when he laid her down on his tattered cloak, the heat that flared when they touched, skin to skin, all down her long length. . . .

Aandred had no heart to hammer, but he felt the pressure of some great unknown emotion, pushing from somewhere, desperate to escape. He shut his eyes, clenched his fists, swayed there for a moment until the mys-

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terious sensation eased. Droam noticed nothing. The beautiful mask was distorted by frustration. "Useless, useless. . . . I'm getting nothing but tangential deep memory. Nothing recent except for her capture; some trauma thwarts me. What's wrong with her?"

Aandred looked at Droam, full of weary astonishment. "What can it be? A mystery! Wait, a notion occurs to me — probably a foolish one — could it have anything to do with the fact that I murdered six of her friends an hour ago?"

Droam gave him a long, cool look. "You indulge your sense of humor dangerously, Huntsman."

Astonishment drained away, leaving only weariness. "My apologies."

"But of course you are correct," Droam said. "She requires time to recover her faculties. I give her into your safekeeping. Cleanse her of vermin; feed and water her; see that no harm befalls her."

"Where can *I* keep her? Would it not be better to give her into the care of one of those who are experienced at guesting? Garnet has volunteered." As soon as he had spoken, Aandred regretted his words, remembering Garnet's face.

But Droam rejected his suggestion. "Keep her in the kennels; surely you have more than one empty run? As to Garnet and the other servitors — I fear they have gone a bit strange over these years of inactivity. When we reopen, I may well be forced to replace them with fresh revenants. Besides, the Picker is a prisoner, not a guest."

Droam's hulk froze; the light went out of its glorious eyes. Aandred extricated the unconscious woman from the probe's chair. Her head fell back; her arms hung limply; her lips had a bluish cast. Inexplicably, he was filled by a sudden fear that she was dead — sometimes guests would not survive Droam's questioning. He held her closer. Breath warmed his damaged cheek; he detected a pulse at the base of her throat. Reassured, he went out to the waiting dogs.

THE KENNEL consisted of a large common area, with the dogs' individual runs along one long wall, and the door into Aandred's small, bare apartment on the other. The walls were unadorned granite, windowless, but well-lit by ceiling light tubes. At one end stood a broad worktable and a bank of diagnostic equipment.

He brought the woman into his quarters and laid her in the wall niche

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in which he slept away his inactive time, then locked the dogs in their runs.

Aandred considered. How to bathe her? No human facilities existed in the castle's crew quarters; Aandred would wash away the dust of his ride under a spray of oil-rich solvent. He almost decided to leave her as she was, but Droam's instructions had been explicit.

Eventually he carried her up to the level where live prostitutes had once been kept, for the use of those guests prohibited by religion or prejudice from copulating with the castle's revenants. The whores were four hundred years gone, but the taps still flowed clean water and nutrient broth.

He set her down on a bed of greasy plastic, stripped away her fringed leathers. The leather was well-tanned and supple, he noticed, not the work of primitives. Still, he pitched it fastidiously down the refuse chute.

When she was naked, he looked at her until his curiosity was satisfied. How long since he had seen a flesh-and-blood woman? He could not remember. She was tall, with small breasts and long, muscular thighs. Her body was imperfect, of course; old silvery scars marked one flank, perhaps the long-healed claw marks of some wild beast. Her pale skin was smooth, though nothing like the silken gloss of the revenant women who staffed the castle. Bruises flowered here and there, where Aandred had gripped her. Her hair . . . her hair was probably magnificent, though now it was a black tangle that obscured her features. He bent over her, parted her hair, searched for parasites. He was somewhat surprised to find none.

Aandred sponged her down with disinfectant solution, then dried her carefully. Strangely, he did not resent the domestic role into which Droam had thrust him. There was a certain fascination in touching the flesh of a living woman.

When he was done, he prowled around the apartment. Most of the clothing in the closet disintegrated into reeking dust at his touch, except for a coverall woven of sturdier synthetic. He took it. He went to the vanity, opened a drawer. A faint ancient perfume still clung miraculously to the combs and brushes. On an impulse, he picked up a comb, slipped it into a pocket of the coveralls. He looked up; the mirror showed him a mad black face, red glaring eyes, glittering teeth. *I'm an ugly one,* he thought ruefully.

He carried her back down to the kennel. On the way, she shifted in

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his arms, and he realized she had awakened, but she kept her eyes shut, her limbs slack.

He put her in dead Cerulean's run, on the mat of artificial grass; beside her he laid the coverall. Cerulean had been one of his favorites, until the night she had fallen down a well and ruptured vital elements of her personality skein. Her empty hulk still lay on the worktable in the kennel.

Aandred shut the grating, thumbed the lock. He took two stainless pans from a locker and went back up to the apartment. One he filled with water, the other with thick broth.

Back in the kennel, he slid the pans through the grating. "Here," he said. "Drink, eat. You'll need your strength."

She lay still, her back to him.

He shrugged. "Do as you like, then. No one will molest you here; you're safe for a time." He opened his forearm and put the dogs to sleep, so that they would not frighten her. They froze, their bright eyes dimming, and Aandred went into his quarters.

Aandred's internal timer awakened him from that vague dreamless state that served him for sleep. He unplugged the recharge cable and swung himself from the niche; his feet clanged to the floor. Through his door came a squeak of fear — then a metallic rattle.

Aandred went swiftly into the kennel. Merm the Troll King was crouched at the captive's grating, jabbing a long-handled meat fork at her. She was pressed back into the far corner, just out of Merm's reach. Her eyes were blank with terror.

"Here," said Aandred. "What's this?" *Merm dared invade his home!* He took a step toward the troll, hands clenching.

Merm's lumpy face was at first full of malicious pleasure, but that emotion rapidly drained away, to be replaced by cringing bravado. "Hello, Huntsman. Just amusing myself. Your prisoner is the talk of the castle. I had to see; the kennel door was open, and I took it to mean you were in the mood for company."

Disgust filled Aandred. "Would I ever describe you as 'company'? Get out, and in the future I'll leave a dog active in the kennel. You'll extract the proper meaning from the situation, should you wander this way again."

Merm rose slowly from the grating, holding his meat fork like a weapon. His small eyes glittered. "Droam wouldn't want you to talk so. I'm

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a valuable property; harm me, and you'll feel Droam's anger."

Aandred raised a trembling finger, pointed to the exit. Merm's bravado crumbled, and the troll scuttled away. At the door, Merm cast a bright, poisonous look over his shoulder, a look that included Aandred, the dogs, and the prisoner.

Aandred stepped to the grating, looked in at the prisoner. She had donned the coverall and made use of the comb. Her hair *was* quite lovely, a thick, silken mane framing the a face of unconventional beauty. Her eyes, fixed unblinkingly on him, were huge with apprehension, but Aandred saw that they would still be large, even in less fearful circumstances. Her cheekbones were a bit too sharp, her chin sturdy, her mouth wide.

Aandred saw that food and water were untouched. "Are you not thirsty? Hungry?"

Her eyes veiled, and she looked away.

"Ah," said Aandred. "I understand. You fear poison, or drugs. Am I right? Don't concern yourself. The probe is more effective than any drug, and when Droam wants you dead, it has a million ways to do the deed."

He was surprised when she replied; he had almost decided she was a mute. "What of you, iron thing? You're a skillful murderer, as you proved last night. Do you want me dead? How many way do you have to do the deed?" She spoke bitterly, but her voice was low and soft, almost a whisper. Her accent was unfamiliar.

He nearly laughed his terrible laugh, but caught himself in time. For some reason, he didn't want to frighten her. "No. No longer do I lust for anything's blood. Except, perhaps, for Merm's, though he has none to spill." *And of course, Droam's.* "Merm is that smelly green heap I just threatened from my kennel, the one who wanted to test you with his fork."

She shuddered. "Him. I thought *you* the ugliest thing I'd ever seen, until I saw him. Are there none but gods and demons in this place?"

"God? Oh, I see. You mean Droam's pretty hulk? I assure you, that was no god, only a better-looking puppet than I, carved of richer material."

She seemed to fall into deep thought, and said no more. After a bit, she lifted the water bowl and drank deeply. Aandred watched her, wondering. She was remarkably self-possessed, considering recent events. Had the

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Had the human race changed so much, or was she simply an unusual woman?

human race changed so much, or was she simply an unusual woman?

Aandred activated the dogs, and they rose from their sleeping mats, tails wagging. He fed them their morning pseudofood, a ritual they never tired of. It served no purpose beyond providing them with a pleasurable stimulus. The pseudofood passed through them unchanged, to be reinvested with odor and taste and then fed to them again.

When the dogs had finished their breakfast, he decided to repair Umber's olfactory transducer. He released Umber from her run, and she leaped joyfully about him. The prisoner's face was pale. Aandred shook his head; her apprehension was natural enough. What would it be like, to die torn by the dogs? His own death had been easy: the prick of the injection, torpor, then oblivion.

Aandred moved Cerulean's empty hulk aside, feeling a small, familiar twinge of sorrow. He whistled at Umber, snapped his fingers. She jumped nimbly to the insulated tabletop, waited with her usual good humor. "Good girl," he said, and stroked her back. She wriggled ecstatically. He opened his forearm and touched a switch. She became a graceful statue, and he applied a screwdriver to the access panel on her brisket.

The transducer was mounted on a swing-out card. He eased it out, applied the point of an analyzer to various diagnostic nodes. The malfunction became clear: a loose memory flake. He popped it out, examined the contact edge, reseated it.

When he had buttoned Umber's chassis and restored her to active mode, the telltale on his forearm burned a steady green. Umber bounced off the table, raced around the kennel, barked her mechanical bark. "Better, girl?" asked Aandred.

His captive pressed against the grating, watching. "You speak oddly for a machine," she said.

"That's because we're not entirely machines," he said. "Not entirely."

"What do you mean?"

He took a stool, sat beside the grating. She drew back slightly; she controlled her fear well. "Once upon a time, we were all living creatures, alive as you," he said. "Me, the dogs, even the rats in the dungeons. Even

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Merm. All once alive, all now dead — except for Droam, who is indeed a machine."

Aandred moved his stool a little closer to the grating, leaned toward the bars. She didn't move away, though her eyes narrowed. "Shall I explain?" he asked. "If I do, what will you trade for this information?" When he had spoken, he felt a trickle of shame. Why was he trying to frighten her? *An ugly old habit,* he thought. She would, soon enough, know terror, when Droam gave her to the trolls, and then she would be dead. "Never mind. Just tell me your name — that will be sufficient."

She stared at him for a long moment. "What harm can it do? My name is Sundee Gareaux." She lifted her chin, gazed into his face with cold eyes, as if daring him to sneer.

Her courage is pleasing, he thought, and then he said, "Listen."

He told of the beginning, seven hundred years past. SeedCorp had come to the Sea of Islands and built Droam, an expensive resort for a special kind of guest, those fascinated by certain legends of Old Earth. Droam's bulk covered several hectares; its towers rose three hundred feet above the island's highest hill. The builders endowed Droam with a potent macromolecular intelligence, and then they conceived their grand scheme.

"Oh, it was a wonderful idea," Aandred muttered. "At first they intended to staff Droam with robots in the shape of the Ancient Folk of Old Earth: elves, trolls, fairies, dwarfs, wizards, and witches. But one of them, the cleverest one . . . she was supervising the building of the castle when the idea came to her. Robots had one flaw — they were predictable. Why, a guest might come to Droam dozens of times over his lifetime. Would boredom set in, if the staff never changed their behavior, never acted irrationally, never displayed any human flaws or foibles? Of course."

Sundee Gareaux's face was intent. "And so . . . ?"

"And so they decided to purchase revenant personalities to ride the hulks."

"What does it mean . . . revenant?"

"Ghosts. We're all ghosts in Droam. The dogs, for example . . . the ghosts of puppies who died for Droam seven hundred years ago. Put to death —painlessly, I'm sure — and their little souls recorded for the Hunt."

Revulsion stained her eyes. "That is how you came to be what you are? You were killed to fill the machine?"

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"Not exactly." He chuckled rustily. "Oh, one or two of the human revenants were bargained for that way — dying men and women who sold themselves for money to leave to their families, and for a chance at some sort of continued life. But most of us are executed criminals, our personalities auctioned to defray the costs of our crime."

The revulsion spread to her mouth. "And were you always a murderer, then?"

He sat and looked at her for a time, until she turned away uneasily. Umber whined and nudged his leg, distressed. Finally Aandred answered. "Of course. I was a famous pirate, I laired on Sook, I went forth with my armada and stole worlds, and always, I laughed. Oh, I was a mighty killer in those days; I destroyed thousands and never thought of it again." He looked away, and red memory blinded him. "But I've had time to think."

"Of what? Last night you and your creatures killed easily enough."

He saw that tears trembled in her eyes. "Droam commands me. Should I defy the castle to spare a band of raggedy Bonepickers? I would be ended instantly. Fail-safes, deadman switches are built into all our hulks; after all, Droam couldn't have the tourists terrorized by criminal zombies, should we decide to run amok. Eh?" He spoke sadly. "It's true that I'm dead already. Still, it's the only sort of life I'll ever have, and I'm somewhat reluctant to give it up."

She spoke in a dreary voice. "I see. So, what happened to the guests?"

He gripped the grating. The mesh buckled under the pressure of his hands. "Fashions changed, oh, about four hundred years ago. Suddenly Droam was passé. The tourists stopped coming, and now we're forgotten. Droam remains convinced that they will come again; I know better. There were other resorts in the Sea of Islands — all dead now. Of course, you know this, you Bonepickers; you survive in the debris of their passing. Droam was always the strongest of them. It may well resist your attacks forever. Such is its intention."

"Attacks?" She was contemptuous. "We attacked no one. We landed to explore, nothing more. The island has plenty of empty land; why should we not farm it? Every year there are more children, and we must feed them. We wouldn't have injured your precious castle. Why would we bother?"

Aandred laughed at her audacity. "What a notion! Turnip patches in the Vale of Lights, Bonepickers gathering mushrooms in the Dimlorn Woods. Urchins fishing in the River Dark. Droam won't be amused."

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Her eyes flashed dangerously. "I've told you my name; do you have a name?"

"Droam calls me Huntsman. But I had another name when I was a man." He paused. "Aandred, I was. A glorious, wicked name once. Now? Meaningless. . . ." His voice had fallen to a wistful whisper.

"I'd almost forgotten it," he lied.

He released the other dogs from their runs, and they tumbled about the common room in a frenzy of delight. Crimson sniffed at the prisoner's grating, wagged his tail, and trotted away. Aandred saw that her face was white. "Don't be afraid," he said. "They wouldn't hurt you now, unless you run."

She seemed unconvinced. "Watch, this is pretty," he said, opening the storage niche built into his right hip. He brought out their favorite toy, a magical ball containing a tiny mechanical homunculus; he had long ago filched it from one of the tower wizards. He tossed it; it rolled along the floor, flashing blue lights, emitting comical squeaks and puffs of violet smoke. The dogs leaped after it joyfully. Sienna reached it first, brought it back to him proudly, ignoring the jealous nips of the others. He kicked it away again, setting off another manic pursuit.

In half an hour, they were bored, and they settled about Aandred. They seemed fascinated by the prisoner; they watched her intently, eyes bright, segmented silver tongues lolling from their mouths.

Sundee Gareaux watched them in equal fascination. "They have a strange look in their eyes," she said. "As if they know some secret."

"Well, they aren't ordinary dogs. They were intelligent puppies when they were flesh, and even a dog can learn many things in seven hundred years." *Perhaps,* he thought, *more than a man.* "I often wonder how much they understand," he mused, stroking Umber's head. "Still, they *are* only dogs."

She was silent for a time, watching the dogs at their play. Then she looked up at him with confused eyes. "They don't seem so terrible now. How very strange, when just last night they killed. . . . Then your dogs were hideous, nightmares." Her mouth twisted. "Now I see grace, even a sort of beauty."

"Of course they're beautiful," he said fiercely. "Of all Droam's creatures, they are the finest and cleanest. You shouldn't blame them for your

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friends' deaths. They do only what they are bred and trained to do. The dogs would chase a ball from the hand of a Picker as readily as they chase it from mine."

Aandred gave his attention to the dogs for a while. When he next glanced in at the prisoner, she lay on the mat, her back to him, apparently asleep.

THE DAY passed as a hundred thousand other days had passed. Aandred played with the dogs and thought about his former life, the lovely bad old days. But the memories had worn thin, as if from too much remembering, and he found his thoughts straying to the Picker woman. What had her life been? he wondered. She had been born in a profoundly regressed culture, the descendants of lost guests and escaped slaves, on a backwater world where the starboats no longer called. She could hope for no more than a lifetime of suffering and an early death. She would never know the wonders of the human galaxy; she would never walk the gilded halls of Dilvermoon or the dirty corridors of Beasterheim, would never see a world from space, like a jewel on the richest velvet, would never experience the thousand joyful luxuries that he had taken for granted in his life as a man.

He shook his head. *Pointless maundering.* Sundee Gareaux no doubt valued her life, such as it was, as much as he valued his own synthetic existence. Or *more,* he thought darkly, but the notion frightened him, and he pushed it aside. *A shame that she must end her life as a troll's plaything.* That thought made him angry. He resolved to break her neck before he gave her to Merm, as Droam would certainly order him to do. He could spare her that horror.

As day passed into evening, the annunciator chimed. Droam's voice sounded from the wall speaker and in his head, a disorienting sensation. "Huntsman. Bring your prisoner to the audience hall."

Aandred found a jeweled leash in a locker he had not opened in a hundred years. "Come," he said to Sundee Gareaux. "You must wear this. Droam will expect me to deliver you without difficulties."

Her eyes were huge, and she hung back. "What if I promise not to run?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "Were I you, I would promise anything and run at the first opportunity. You may be more agile than I, and though you could

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never escape the castle, you might evade me for a time. Droam would soothe its impatience with my pain."

She bowed her head, and he locked the collar around her neck. The dogs jumped against the gratings of their runs and implored him to take them, too. "Be good, puppies," he said. "You can't go this time. I'll be back soon."

They walked through the bright corridors of the castle, the leash slack between them. Sundee Gareaux looked about curiously. Few of the castle's staff were abroad so early in the evening, but they passed a party of dwarf janitors armed with mop buckets and sonic brooms, a white-bearded wizard and his youthful assistant, three trolls who stood in a dark doorway and sniggered, a red-haired witch magnificent in the glittering habit of the Dark Mystery. His prisoner studied each passerby closely.

"All dead," she said in a marveling voice.

"In a sense. They believe themselves to be alive." To his amazement, he felt slightly defensive.

"I'm bewildered," she said. "But they don't seem to be enjoying their immortality; they all wear sad, bitter faces."

"You don't see why?" The long, empty years weighed on him. "I'll explain, so you won't think us the Fortunate Folk." *It could be worse for you, Sundee Gareaux,* he thought. *Perhaps you'll find your own fate more acceptable if I tell you about us.*

"Droam is staffed by a few more than three thousand human revenants. Is there a Picker village that big? No? Does that seem a great many people to you?" He laughed a booming laugh, and she winced. "Oh, it would be, if our halflives lasted no longer than yours. Seventy years, eighty — is that a good span for a Picker? We've been together here in Droam for seven hundred years. Can you imagine? Imagine! And consider who we are. Murderers, rapists, torturers, those who stole things so precious that they were put to death for it. Merm, for example, was a high sheriff. He enslaved young boys and girls with spurious charges, used them brutally, and when they were worn out, he buried their bodies on his prison farm. He swears they found only a fraction of his victims, and they found a thousand! Do you wonder at the evil you see in his face?"

Sundee Gareaux watched him with a mixture of pity and horror, her face white, her lips bloodless.

He continued, pushed by a passion he had thought worn away forever.

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"Did you think I exaggerated my crimes? No! And I was a paragon of nobility, compared to many here in Droam: I stole only from the wealthy; I used violence only on the violent; I attacked only those who could defend themselves. I admit I was a quixotic pirate, but I did not wish to think of myself as a monster. Hah!" Had he tear ducts, he might have cried; instead he slammed his fist against the wall. The smooth marble facing shattered explosively, revealing the rough concrete beneath.

She stood at the farthest extent of the leash, hands pressed to her mouth. A chip of marble had nicked her cheek and caused a small trickle of blood.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've become overexcited. I'll calm myself; don't be afraid."

"Why don't you run away?" For the first time, her voice carried no undertone of hatred. "Surely there are boats."

"Oh yes. Fairy boats drift on the River Dark, and the Elf King's funeral galley hangs in slings under his pavilion on the Quiet Shore. You don't understand. Droam knows where each of us is at all times; with a thought, it could terminate me. Or punish me terribly. And of course, we cannot preserve our personalities without Droam; without access to Droam's refresher circuits and energy nodes, we would all fade away. If I left or Droam were destroyed — in five years or ten, I'd be gone."

"Does it know your thoughts, too?"

"No. We have that much privacy. It can speak directly to our minds; but to reply, we must direct our thoughts into a special mode. This is true only because so many direct linkages would spread Droam's intellect too thin; it might diffuse away into nothing. Though for a fact there's been some migration; some of our darkness has seeped into Droam over the years." He sighed.

They walked on in silence. When they were nearly to the audience hall, she spoke again. "I still don't understand. Why did they fill their resort with horrors?"

"They aimed for a quality of 'dark glamour'; they succeeded, but that sort of thing went out of vogue. . . ."

In the audience hall, she was silent until they approached the nexus pit. "What is it?" she asked.

"Droam. Its brain, in essence." He detected a sudden tension in her

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body, and tightened his grip on the leash. "Restrain yourself, Sundee Gareaux. What you're considering would do no good. Look carefully; see how the force bubble diffracts the light? If you jump over the wall, the bubble will prevent you from falling onto the nexus, unless you now weigh ten times what you weighed when last I carried you. That much mass might, I think, overload the bubble." He tugged at the leash. "Besides, if you kill Droam, I will die. You wouldn't want that on your conscience." He meant it as a joke, but her face was full of baffled despair.

Droam's hulk waited beside the probe. "Ah," it said. "Our guest."

THE PROBE confirmed Droam's worst fears. Sundee Gareaux's tribe was desperate; they had no choice but to try to occupy the island. Aandred watched the deliberations of several village councils, through Sundee Gareaux's eyes. Each group of grim old men and women came to the same conclusion: settlers would be sent to the island they called Neverland, despite the terrifying legends.

Aandred learned an interesting thing about Sundee Gareaux: she was the leading tribal authority on the decaying synthetic ecologies that infested the Sea of Islands. So she had been chosen to go ashore with the first exploratory party.

. . . she stood on the beach, holding her husband tight, forcing back tears for his sake. "Don't worry; we'll be fine. No one's been to Neverland for eighty years or more. The monsters have probably all broken down — entropy's on our side." She looked down at her son, a sturdy two-year-old with flame-red hair and a truculent expression. "You'll be in more danger than I will, I think. Be careful, and keep a close eye on our own little monster." She ruffled the fiery hair, picked the child up for a last hug. He clung to her, though ordinarily he would have struggled to escape. His father pulled him gently away, and she waded through the surf to the waiting boat. She waved, until they crossed the reef into blue water and the figures on the beach were lost in the light. . . .

Once again Aandred found himself in the grip of some powerful alien emotion. It was so difficult to identify, without the somatic tags that living humans took for granted. Were he alive, would he feel tears on his cheeks, would he feel a great pressure in his throat, would his chest heave with suppressed sobs? He could not say, but he was almost blind with it, whatever it was. He looked down at Sundee Gareaux's pale, dreaming face,

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and the pressure of the unknown emotion increased to an unbearable level.

He shuddered. Droam was speaking to him. "... so I'll leave the organization of the teams to you — this was your area of expertise, not so? We'll take the galley, knock them back one island at a time. We'll kill as many as we can, burn the fields, blow up the reefs, poison the wells. We won't get them all, of course, but it will be many generations before they breed back enough to be dangerous."

The situation becomes unreal, Aandred thought. He felt like a shadow in a tragic farce. "A large undertaking," he muttered.

"But necessary. Report your progress tomorrow; be ready to sail in three days."

"What of the woman?" he asked, before he thought.

"Give her to Merm and his crew. Call it incentive, if you like." Droam went still and spoke no more.

Aandred carried her slowly down through the castle. He tried to think, but he could see no way out. He reached the kennel, shut the portal behind him, laid her on the worktable. She was pale, but a pulse beat strongly at the base of her throat. *Better if she'd died in the probe,* he thought. *Do it now, before she wakes; she'll never know.* He flexed his hands, cupped them around her fragile skull. *Such a shame, to destroy so lovely a vitality.*

For a long moment, he could not move. Then he thought of the trolls and their spits and fires and hooks. His resolve hardened. But before he could do the kindness, her eyes fluttered open and she looked up at him. Disconcertingly, there was no confusion in them; it was as if she understood what he meant to do. He snatched his hands away from her.

Minutes passed in charged silence. Finally she struggled to sit up. "What did I say?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"Everything. The truth."

"What will happen now?"

He looked at her, thankful for the mad mask that served him for a face. He could do her one kindness, at least: he could conceal from her the imminent death of her people. "I don't know," he answered.

"But nothing good?"

He shrugged, searched for some soft lie. His mind would not respond;

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in frustration, he thumped his forehead with his fists.

She huddled away, frightened. "What is it, Aandred?"

A pounding came from the portal. "Huntsman! We're here to collect our prize!" It was Merm's oily voice. The Troll King thrust open the portal and waddled into the room, followed by two of his subjects.

Merm started to push past Aandred. The troll was bright-eyed with triumph and anticipated pleasure. "What fun, what fun," Merm said, reaching out for Sundee Gareaux.

Time seemed to stop. Aandred had forever to look into her unbelieving face — the wide green eyes, the pale, taut mouth. The moment ended; he roared and threw Merm away.

The Troll King smashed into the wall, then bounced up quivering, his loose mouth working furiously. "You dare? Droam will punish you. But first we will punish you!" He drew an iron truncheon from his sash, as did his two henchmen.

The dogs pressed against their gratings, snarling. Aandred felt his rage expand, a beautiful, soundless explosion, lighting up all his dark corners. He flipped open his forearm, touched a switch, and the gratings snapped open. The dogs bounded forth, leaped on the astounded trolls. All three died before they could make another sound.

The dogs played with the tatters of plastic, the mangled steel struts, the tangles of wire and hydraulic tubing, making happy dog noises. "You see," Aandred said. "Such good dogs. So loyal." He waited, hunched over with dread, for Droam's response.

When it came, he fell among the dogs, writhing. The pain enfolded Aandred with an intensity that drove away all thought. After a timeless period, the pain eased enough for him to hear Droam's words. "Come to the hall, Huntsman. Bring your prisoner, *alive*; bring your miserable, ruinous beasts." The pain closed in for a final searing moment, then ceased.

He lay on the floor for a moment, gathering his strength, while the dogs sniffed him anxiously. Then fear drove him to his feet. "I dare not wait, Sundee Gareaux. Droam has summoned me — and you. And the dogs." A great sadness stole into him, filling the emptiness left by the pain.

He held her leash loosely, led her toward the audience hall. Her face was still white with fear, but she walked steadily, head high. "What will it do?" she asked.

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"Droam will punish me," he said. The dogs sensed his mood and stayed close, casting worried looks up at him.

"How? Pain?"

That too, he thought "It will kill dogs. It knows what I value, it knows how best to hurt me."

They paused before the tall doors of the audience hall. "What will it do to me?" she asked.

He set his hand on the great silver latch. "I think you must die, Sundee Gareaux. If I have a chance, I'll try to make it easy."

Her face crumpled, but only for an instant. Then she nodded, and her mouth lifted into a very small smile. He swung back the door, and they went inside.

At the far end, Droam's hulk paced back and forth with quick little steps. "Come," it roared, and now its voice was not so beautiful. "Come here swiftly. There are things I need to do with these hands."

Aandred glanced aside. She was shaking, but under control. *Admirable,* he thought. *Admirable.*

As they passed the glowing nexus, his hand darted into his hip compartment, came out with the magic ball. He gave himself no time to reconsider; in the same motion, he tossed it over the wall into the nexus. The tiny homunculus inside shrieked piercingly. Aandred shouted, "Fetch!"

Instantly, Droam began to kill him, and he felt his hulk collapse. But before he was quite dead, Droam had transferred its attention to the dogs.

It was too late. One dog stiffened and spasmed in mid-leap, but the rest landed on the force bubble. The bubble collapsed with a flat, snapping implosion, spilling the dogs onto the surface of Droam's intellect. They scrambled after the ball, floundered through the delicate crystalline strands, shattered Droam into a cloud of glittering shards.

Aandred got to his knees, shuddering, his hands clattering against the floor. Droam's hulk had toppled and lay facedown, motionless. Inside the castle an emptiness spread, until it had swept through every niche and corner of that great pile. The first faint screams reached his ears.

A long time later, a red-haired boy of ten led his younger sister along a path through green woods. On a stone bench sat a statue of black metal. The statue's hand rested on the withers of a rusting steel dog; two similar

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dogs lay corroding at the statue's feet. The statue's face was mad, brutish, with horrible glaring eyes, and the little girl was frightened. "Ugly," she said.

"No," the boy said sternly. "Never say that! When we first came to Neverland, he killed a hundred monsters with his dogs and kept the rest away until they wore out. Without him, we'd all be dead."

"Well, then, why is he out here by himself?"

The boy's face was somber, as if he remembered a sorrow too deep for his years. "He got slower and slower, after the last monsters were gone. One day he came up here with the dogs he still had left. For the rest of that summer, he would wink at me when I came to see him. But in the spring, he'd stopped moving."

"That's sad."

"Yes."

After a while they turned and went back down the hill, toward their lives.

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

The Best of The Nebulas, Ben Bova, Ed., Tor, $14.95

Einstein Simplified, Sidney Harris, Rutgers University Press, $9.95

. . . but, first. . . .

I WENT TO the Nebulas. That is to say, I went to the Nebula Awards *banquet* in New York April 23, for the red-eye flight from Los Angeles had put me in Newark two hours late that morning. That gave me enough time for a good day's nap, enabling me to miss all the program items entirely and arise for a breakfast of chicken and string-beans that evening.

The banquet room was cavernous; an old hotel ballroom in the classic style, with mezzazine, whose ceiling disappeared into geosynchronous altitudes, and from which dangled PA speakers as black and bulky as something Pluto would send out to probe us.

The Penta Hotel, as a matter of fact, was the Pennsylvania. The phone number is still Pennsylvania 6-5000, and, kept on Hold, one is entertained by Glenn Miller while the *fonctionaire* is off somewhere screwing up your reservation. But it is Glenn Miller, and there among the tables and the murmur, I seemed to detect faint gleams of brass and ebony in the air above the dais table, and the faint grunts and shoe-slides of couples doing the Lindy Hop.

Why would one do this? I asked myself — aside from the pleasure of seeing Ed and Audrey again, and sharing a table with Isaac Asimov and other nice people, who seemed in good health and spirits. One would do this, I decided, in memory of the old days.

It surprises me still to have old days. I have come to terms with the fact that I can no longer swing a pick eight hours and then go out and hell around 'til dawn, (although I haven't tried it in years, and so for all I know still could). But I'm certainly not the fellow in the mirror. Someday, perhaps, I'll be him. But not now. Still and all, as I look around at ballrooms full of earnest members of the (Fantasy and) Sci-

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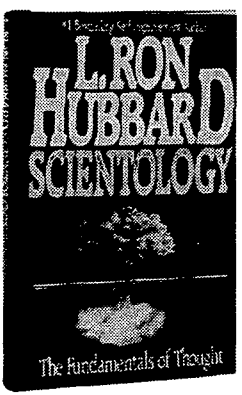

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ence Fiction Writers of America (and Elsewhere), and catch the effluvia of their view of things, I am, myself, a probe gingerly lowered into an alien time.

These are my friends and acquaintances, many of them. Some are former students of classes I have taught, and I regard those with a special affection, and respect for what they've made of themselves since the time when they were novices. All of them are interesting people. But I'm of the Old Guard . . . perhaps, better put, the Lost Patrol.

Which gives one a fair turn on the turn, because the group with which I now belong once regarded me as a young punk ticking away unfathomably, as all young punks do. The past is collapsing into a monobloc.

Fred Pohl, now my warm friend, was wont some decades ago to wince when he saw the callow youngster come high-voiced into his literary agency, all pop-eyed and sweaty over some sale to *Fantastic Universe* made or lost. Jack Williamson, with over sixty years since his first publication; Isaac, whom I first read on my high school bus . . . I am with them, now. It's as if the days between the beginning of *Amazing Stories* and the change of *Astounding's* name to *Analog* were all in the same decade.

But that, I decided, was because they were. I was of the last generation not to be like the generations of the SFWA, but that's still on the other side of the dividing line. In the late 1950s, our world turned upside down; we are of the antipodeans, not to say of the antediluvians.*

It's O.K. I mean, I ain't done yet, as neither Jack and Isaac nor Fred or a score of others are done yet. And if you don't quite believe that, try me in the next issue, and go look on the best-seller list for the others. We can talk to the audience pretty good. But we are fundamentally, ineradicably different from people who also talk to the same audience, but never heard of Glenn Miller, or dining at the Automat, or co-signers, or playing poker for IOUs.

Very, very few of us had cause to complain about the cost of parking garages, or shilly-shally over whether one would tip 15% or twenty. But, again, that's not the real difference. The real difference is that for us, getting paid any significant amount will forever be a novelty, which means we clearly, *imprimis*, no question, did it for something else.

Not that anyone actually does it for money. Well . . . hardly anyone, and you can pretty much tell who those are — not because any given

**And in my case, the sesquipedalians.*

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story betrays it, but because the body of their work has this odd flavor. To all intents and purposes, nobody does it for money. They do it because they can't help themselves. But you have got to realize, as you contemplate an SF career in your future these days, that you are going to be punished for it with the whips of affluence. Whereas we on my side of the world understood that we were going to be punished for it by lack.

Not that everyone actually gets money. There is plenty of room on the publishing scene for the starving artist still, and the infuriating abuses that you would expect Heaven to cry out for, while Heaven remains mute. But the jackpots *are* out there, for some, and this gets on one's mind during the formative years.

I am about to sound like an old fogey, if I haven't yet done so. Study carefully what I say next: It is *generally* true that today's apprentice writer devotes a certain portion of the available learning time to the study of the market, whereas it was *generally* true that the apprentices of yesteryear devoted the same space in their lives to studying the nature of the literature.

This is *not* to say that we were more pure, and hence better. Nor that our time was attractively innocent. For — forgive my presumption, fellow antipodeans — we were in fact as bent, and our ways as twisty, as anyone could wish. And we wanted the money, as we got on. The first meeting of a prospective SF writers' guild occurred in 1953, and I forget what we called our creation, but it did meet at least once more, and it did have cheap stationery, though Harry Harrison, the designer, got the address wrong.

Damon Knight called the first meeting of the Milford Sf Writers' Conference in the mid-50s, and banding together to squeeeze more attention out of the publishers was very much on the agenda of this harmless convocation of passive literateurs. It wasn't long afterward that Knight, and several unindicted co-conspirators, founded the SFWA. They did not do it because they wanted a place to sip tea and nibble croissants together. Yet I do not recall that any of us were so bold as to dream of the best-seller list, or of million-dollar advances.

Instead, the real key word is "attention." We were sick of being ignored, a condition we detected because mystery writers got more money. They were presumed to bring in more money, and so we sat in the anteroom while they waltzed in to the editor's office out of turn. So we wanted more money because it would improve the man-

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ners of the receptionist.*

That is, I think, the sole and sufficient reason for the world having been turned upside down, by us, so that we could in the end be aliens. We are replete with scars incised upon the hidden portions of our bodies by the appraising glances of *fonctionaires.*

God sees, but waits.

What of the art? you say. What was meant by 'studying the nature of the literature'? Well, we had no choice, did we? Since we were volunteering to sustain marginal careers — and since no one really knew what the audience was, which ignorance was a factor in preventing specific marketing to individuals who might be inclined to swell the numbers of that audience — we wrote for "ourselves."

Somewhere out there were about 100,000 people who would buy an SF magazine about 80% of the time if it were *Astounding,* somewhat less if it were some other title. They did not buy SF books at all; didn't know they existed. Supporting the specialty publishers was something done by a much harder, smaller core who knew which obscure bookstores to haunt and sometimes cared to do so. We were part of that core. So that's who we studied to write for; "ourselves."

Ourselves were actually what certain editors had made of us; Gernsback, Bates, Tremaine, Pohl, Campbell. But they were part of "us" — the core whose idea of what SF ought to be self-fulfilled itself by selecting its future writers from its present-day readers. The way one became a name on the table of contents or even — Holy Klono grant with his brazen hooves! —the cover, was to find in the existing form some aspect that had not yet been too much discovered.

Given the knowledge of what had been done — that is, enough knowledge of what one had loved to read — and a modicum of talent and intelligence, success as an SF writer was within the grasp of anyone with the patience to develop the skills. "Success" of course was defined as acceptance by the people who'd had their names on the covers. That is, success was defined by the degree of attention one got from the people one wanted to impress; that is, "ourselves."

I would estimate, on the basis of almost no data, that there were about 5,000 bodies within "ourselves" — that is, people who would buy every piece of SF they could get their hands on, if they could somehow find the money, which they often couldn't. A harder datum is that I know for a fact that at the

*Donald Westlake, "Ed McBain" and John D. MacDonald took the easy way out.

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first Milford we were able to count just seven SF writers in the entire (English-speaking) world who did not have day jobs.

Despite what it sounds like, this is not, however, a retrospective on difficult economic conditions. It is a retrospective on a time when you could know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, whether what you were planning to write, or had just written, would appeal to its "audience." Furthermore, you could pretty well gauge the *degree* to which this particular piece of creation would appeal to that audience.

You couldn't gauge what it would do for the 100,000, of course, so in a sense when you wrote an "off-trail" story (as they were called, by editors who'd bought them for some reason and now had to find some way to sell the reader on them), you were probing at the enigmatic 100,000 to see if maybe, this time, you would hit some (proportionally sized) jackpot out there. But you didn't really trust that.

I remember that when Ray Bradbury, for one, did hit the jackpot, we turned our backs on him for having done it with something that wasn't real SF. And Theodore Sturgeon wrecked his life trying to find the way to get the general audience to understand how good an SF writer he was . . . how good an unchanging SF writer he was; how good it was to bring the SF approach into the western, into the historical romance, oh, into anything; but *the* great SF style, with "the" defined by what it fascinated Ted Sturgeon to do as a good peer of Ted Sturgeon's peers.

We worked to certainties. Those who inhabit the hemisphere we helped turn toward the Sun are not so fortunate; they work to what will sell, when the data only tell them what is selling. The market — the market estimated at five million, or nine million, depending on whom you consult — for all our space-age analytical methods and demographic positionings is a constantly shape-changing thing, snorting and thrashing under the covers. It is sobering to gaze upon engagements with this intractable creature; to be in the presence of so much daring, and so much concommitant anxiety. We knew who and what would give us scars. They suffer random amputations in the dark.

Well, I went to the Nebula banquet. Ray Bradbury got the Grand Master award for career accomplishment. He was the only antipodean winning. James Morrow got a Nebula for the best short story of the year, George Alec Effinger for novelette, Connie Willis for novella, and Lois McMaster Bujold for novel. Podean names, every one of them. Good ones; excellent ones, signed

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to excellent SF. What will they be thinking, do you suppose, those who come to some such occasion in the future for their Grand Masters? Will they glimpse, at the edges of the room, Bradbury and Asimov, Williamson and Pohl? On the night of April 23, did any of them see Heinlein? And did they know what they were looking at?

Tor gave us all a book; *The Best of The Nebulas*, an anthology compiled by Ben Bova, who inherited the mantle of John Campbell at *Analog* and was the first fiction editor for *Omni*. In it are short stories and novelettes that have won over the years between 1965 and 1980. It is a vision of landmarks; Zelazny's "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth," and "He Who Shapes," as well; "'Repent, Harlequin!' Said the Ticktockman," (and two others) by Harlan Ellison; two by Samuel R. Delany, two by James Tiptree, Jr., two by Fritz Leiber, one each by Silverberg, Moorcock. Russ, McCaffrey, Le Guin, Sturgeon, McIntyre, Varley, Simak, and George R. R. Martin.

Here are "Houston, Houston, Do You Read?" and "The Grotto of The Dancing Deer"; "Behold The Man" and "When It Changed"; "Dragonrider," "Slow Sculpture," and "The Day Before the Revolution"; "Love is The Plan the Plan is Death," "Gonna Roll the Bones," "The Persistence of Vision," and "Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones." And more. Listen to those titles going by! They are like years being dropped into place.

And you cannot separate the podean creativity from the other, though in fact only Leiber, Simak and Sturgeon are here to present the work of those who saw the world another way. Most of the people are different; only somewhat, some of them, like Moorcock, Zelazny and McCaffrey; very different, others. But you cannot see the line of the terminator. It is all good work — great work, most of it, by any literary standard — and so the world is well. We shall not haunt you new ones unkindly.

One notices, however, that there is no "cyberpunk" work here. Nor any representation of the other "new" sorts of SF. But one can feel them waiting, the revolutionaries, in the wings; pressing. One can feel the English as well — What, *only* Moorcock! Foul! Injustice! Scandal! Well, who'd have a Nebula anyway? — and one awaits the next volume, with its result of later banquets . . . that is, of *this* banquet.

But I wonder, on the strength of this massively impressive sampling, whether the Nebula work done by those who intervened between 1980 and 1989 was in fact different from

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what has been done, or is being done, or will be done.

I don't think it will be. It will be done to different fashions, but it won't be of an emphatically new sort . . . at least, not when viewed in retrospect, as one sees it here in this book. I remember when Samuel R. Delany's work was considered revolutionary. And it's not — not now; it's not only the past of the writers that's forming a monobloc, it's the past of the literature, as well. It's all one literature after all. We do not haunt each other unkindly.

And now for something completely different.

Sidney Harris's cartoons, as you know, appear regularly in these pages. They also appear in scores of other places, and have for years. The thing I never noticed until *Einstein Simplified* came my way,* was his bent for science. This is rare. We have had brilliant cartoonists doing fantasy — Charles Addams, of course, and Gahan Wilson, and, surrealistically, Virgil Partch, for three who come to mind at once, but as I recall the supposedly science fictional cartoons in the pulps, and since, that has been a quite ineptly practiced specialty.

Harris is different. Harris plays familiarly with science and technology, betraying an education and an intellectual grasp that far exceed those of the guy who draws flying saucer jokes and tentacular Martians holding up empty water jugs and saying "Take me to your liter." And he's funny.

He's funny in ways *I* like. Judge for yourself. My favorites are the series about evolution, the captionless drawings of the cloning labs, and the coal liquification facility next door to the oil-solidification project, and the ostensibly dumb one about "Let's go over to Celsius' place." I also enjoyed the cordless toaster.

Live and be well.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

I'VE BEEN doing this column for a couple of years now, yet it seems that a few readers still don't understand what it's about. One fanzine, for instance, refers to me as a "book recommender" rather than a "book reviewer." Another reader has pointed out that my reviews are so unrelentingly positive that I lose credibility, and suggested that manic raves like my review of Dave Wolverton's *On My Way to Paradise* would be more effective if I occasionally trashed somebody.

To which my answer is: Look at the title of this column. "Books to Look For." I'm reviewing books that I think are worth paying attention to. My reviews aren't completely positive — many of the books I write about are flawed, and I talk about those flaws. But I only mention a book if I think it's worth reading in the first place.

I believe, very strongly, that a reviewer has nothing intelligent to say about a book he despises. This is not out of a sense of good manners or exaggerated gentility. It's because I believe a reviewer should only review books he *understands*, and if you find nothing of value in a book, you clearly do not understand it. Every book has a value to *somebody*, or the author could not have written it.

A review that completely trashes a book says nothing about the book, but it *can* say several things about the reviewer. In increasing order of repulsiveness, they are:

1. The reviewer is not in the natural audience of the book in question.

2. The reviewer is narcissistic enough to assume that books he doesn't like are objectively bad.

3. The reviewer is willing to accept money and applause for heaping abuse on a person whose worst crime was to offer an imperfect tale to an audience that is quite free to ignore it anyway.

4. The reviewer vents his personal spite against an author by attacking his books, an act roughly comparable to spitting on the children of your enemies.

Could I write viciously entertaining trash reviews? Oh, indeed I can, and in private conversation I sometimes do. But I am not eager to establish my public credibility on the book of eviscerated authors.

There is another reason, however, why I don't write trash reviews, and I find it quite a compelling one. I only review novels that I finish, and I only finish novels that I enjoy. Life is

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short. Why should I spend hours reading a book that does not engage me?

So I will continue the policy implied by this column's title, until the editor of this magazine determines he'd rather use this space for another purpose. And if my unrelentingly positive tone bothers you, remember that for every book I review here, I begin reading and then set aside at least a half-dozen others. My negative reviews of those books are elegant in their simplicity: I do not mention them here.

The Schemes of Dragons, Dave Smeds, Ace, paper, 246pp, $3.50

Dave Smeds writes fantasy with the inventiveness and rigor of the best sort of hard science fiction. His story of a world being conquered by a Hitlerian dragon is so real that when you set it on the same shelf with woodsy-elvesy fantasies, within a week they crumble into dust.

After a confusing, melodramatic, and completely unneccesary prologue (NOTE TO WRITERS: Consider cutting off your fingers before you write a prologue), *The Schemes of Dragons* begins with Toren, a Fhali tribesman, getting captured by strangers, who magically force him to disgorge his tribe's totem. That's right, disgorge it — a translucent blue tortoise that contains the memories and personalities of his ancestors. Since childhood they have been present in his mind, teaching him but also keeping him tied to all the tribal traditions and tabus. Now, for the first time, he is alone in his own body — and begins to discover things about himself that he never knew before.

This is just the first of many wonderful events. We meet the goddess Struth, a strange and perverse character; the closely bonded brother and sister Alemar and Elenya, who struggled to obtain two powerful talismans, only to surrender them to Toren at the end; a brilliantly malicious wizard who spies on his enemies through the eyes of birds; a marvelously believable non-human species of "fairies."

Most of all, though, what impresses me is the way Smeds makes all his characters deep enough to have the illusion of life, a bit of magic that most fantasy writers never quite master. I was especially taken with the way Toren responds to having his totem restored. In a perfect figure of the way individuals connect with, yet diverge from, their community, Toren finds that he has changed so much that he can hardly bear to have his ancestors inside him anymore. Yet he can't bear *not* to have them, and so must find a precarious balance between independence and connection. As must we all.

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This book does not end — at least not in a satisfying way. It is clearly a middle book in a series, but given how many years we waited between volume one and volume two, I dare not hope for the finale until well into the 1990s. Don't wait.

Snow White and Rose Red, Patricia C. Wrede, TOR: Fairy Tales, cloth, 273pp, $15.95

Edited by Terri Windling, with luscious covers by Tom Canty, I thought the Fairy Tales series was the best publishing project launched at Berkley-Putnam-Ace-Kitchen-sink since they devoured each other in a corporate feeding frenzy a few years back. These were beautiful, fascinating hardcover books, with masterful entries by such lights as Stephen Brust, Charles de Lint, and Kara Dalkey.

So of course Putnam-Berkley-Ace let it drop.

I was disappointed — another worthy project down the tubes. Until I got TOR's monthly mailing and discovered that, lo! the Fairy Tales series has been resurrected under another rubric. Same Tom Canty cover art. Same Terri Windling mix of whimsy, fancy, and devotion to the old masters.

The new entry is Patricia C. Wrede's *Snow White and Rose Red*. Her twist on the old Grimm fairy tale is to set it in Elizabethan England, and the setting works very well, with echoes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and witch-burnings, the Virgin queen and *King Lear*. The story attempts nothing of great significance, but there is much delightful comedy and pleasant danger along the way.

In fact, my only problem wth it was the Elizabethan dialogue. While most of the time it was accurate enough, it seemed to have been modeled on Shakespeare's highly formal blank verse rather than the much more appropriate vulgar speech of his clown scenes; it wasn't Hamlet whose voice we needed here, It was Grumio. And even if the level of language had been right, the humdrum modern English of the narrative made the archaic dialogue all the more jarring. But it's a tricky period to write in, anyway, and by the end of the novel I was finally used to the dissonance and stopped being annoyed by it.

Besides, most people don't give a damn about Elizabethan English, so what bothered me probably won't bother you at all. Enjoy the book — and then set it on your shelves face out so that everyone who visits your home can enjoy the Tom Canty cover. It's the cheapest way I've seen to get a good print of our most romantic fantasy artist.

* * *

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A Dozen Tough Jobs, Howard Waldrop, Mark V. Ziesing, PO Box 806, Willimantic CT 06226, cloth, 135pp, $16.00 trade edition $40 limited edition.

You've heard of Southern Gothic fiction, right? Well, here comes Howard Waldrop, the new apostle of Southern Manic.

For many years, Waldrop has been sort of the Jonathan Winters of science fiction, writing offbeat humor that ranges from black comedy to the truly weird. His first novel, *Them Bones*, an alternate-history tale set in the Mississippi basin, was one of the best of the 1980s. Now he brings us *A Dozen Tough Jobs*, which is, yes folks, a retelling of the Labors of Hercules, set in a Mississippi town in the 1920s.

Because it's Waldrop writing it, though, it's more than a comic reworking of an old myth. It's also a clear depiction of life in that sunbeaten, humid, fearful place and time. The rhythms of speech, the slang, the relations between the races, between rich and poor, between men and women, all are there, with the power and ugliness and majesty of real life. Waldrop's comedy comes from his true-seeing eye, and *A Dozen Tough Jobs* puts him right among William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, and Harry Crews as one of the uncompromising prophets of the American South.

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In which a computer genius and film nut combines his interests to produce movies that are the ultimate in real-life simulations . . .

How Hamster Loved the Actroid with Garbo's Eyes

By Chet Williamson

IF THERE WAS anybody who could have created an actroid like her, it was Hamster. He was a goddamned genius, no question. I'm not talking run-of-the-mill genius — computer whiz or artistic genius or just some guy who's good with figures. I'm talking *synthesis* here, Renaissance brain, Grade Quadruple-A/All-Around *Wizard*, a guy who makes Jobs and Wozniak look like Abbott and Costello. Hamster hacked from the day his fingers were fat enough to stroke a keyboard, and when he was sixteen, he became a consultant to Big Blue. They wanted to put him on staff, but he wouldn't do it — claimed it would cut into his own R&D. He was right, as usual, and a year later he came up with the Hampshire II chip all by his lonesome, and made Bobby Hampshire the biggest name in phosphor. To me, though, he was still Hamster, the nick-

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name I'd given him when we were both boy wonders, and I've used it ever since. I guess that's why he hung on to me, because I reminded him that he was human. His parents had begun to worship him when he was about seven, and it's a wonder that he never got spoiled, that his ego didn't blossom as fiercely as his IQ. But Hamster never had time to get a swelled head. He was always too busy learning things. That's why I liked him, and why I still do.

The grand slam came in '92, when we were both twenty. That was the year when Hamster, with my minimal help, finally developed what the world knows as Synthecin, short for Synthetic Cinema, but what we always called actroids. People had tried to digitally simulate real life before, and a lot of companies had come damn close. The drawback was the cost. Top flight simulation of real-life people cost upwards of twenty grand a second to produce, if you had the time to kill in the first place. At that rate the folks on the cutting edge of the technology were light-years away from pumping out weekly sitcoms, let alone a single full-length feature that would be convincing to anyone with eyes that could detect light.

"Screw business applications," Hamster said frequently during the year we put the actroid push on. "Damn business people can't even get what's there out of an ABM Pre-C, so why should we crash our heads trying to get them deeper in data?"

Hamster didn't like businessmen. Hamster did like computers and movies. When we were kids, he used to relax during programming orgies by watching old horror flicks on his VCR, and later as a teenager, he got into Garbo films. It was only natural that he would combine the two interests so that he'd never have to relax again.

What Hamster sought was nothing less than perfection in comgen graphics. He wanted to get it to a point where no one would be able to tell that what they saw was not a film made with living, breathing actors. And he wanted me to help in this great quest because a) I was his best friend; b) I was almost as much a prodigy in art as he was in computers, and; c) I had a knowledge of anatomy that made most surgeons look like premed punks.

It was pretty damn remarkable that two kids not yet even adults could succeed where Lucasfilm, Magi, and all the others could not, but they didn't have Hamster. And while most of them were interested in profit,

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Hamster was on a mission from the great god *Cinema*. I have to admit that I really didn't do that much — just answered the half a million questions that Hamster asked me about muscle groups and movements, about textures and colors and shapes, in short, anything having to do with the physical aspects of the human body in motion. Most of the time I just sat around until he said, "Stosh, gotta question." Stosh was short for MacInstosh, a nickname Hamster hung on me. My real name is Brock Grandzinski. Hunched over his monitor and keyboard, Hamster would ask me things like:

"Stosh, when he tosses that grenade, does that flexor *carpi ulnaris* move like that or what?"

"Stosh, when she opens her mouth, does the zygomaticus stretch that far or what?"

"Stosh, does that look like shit or what?"

We worked eighteen-hour days, and I had to demand breaks for exercising. Meals were sent in, and they were terrific. At least mine were. Hamster had a couple of sandwiches a day, and some soup when I could get some into him. My sex life suffered terribly that year, but Hamster's didn't, since he had none to speak of. As far as I know, he was a virgin, and never tried very hard not to be. Even though he had a plastic rating in excess of $200 million, he stood five foot four, weighed 130 pounds without software, wore horn-rimmed glasses thick as a cheap laptop, and buttoned his plaid shirts all the way up to the neck. Rob Lowe he was not.

But maybe there is something in self-denial, for by the year's end, Hamster was able to make living, breathing human beings out of nothing but a bunch of little 0s and 1s, and a ton of old video footage. I don't know computers like Hamster, so I can't really say how he did it, and I wouldn't if I could, but it had something to do with the fact that geometric shapes are easier to animate than anything else, and what Hamster did was break down the human body into geometric shapes: a whole *mess* of geometric shapes, like five hundred in one hand alone — or at least, that's what he claimed.

Hamster sucked in everything I told him like a sponge, and by the time he had the thing rolling and the producers bashing down his door, my work was done. God love the man, he was sure as hell generous with me. I got a third of all profits, and was paid an annual consulting fee besides, for which I went over to Hamster's compound, had a few beers, watched the

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movies he made, and totally flipped out over them. I mean, these things were *brilliant*.

Some people said that Hamster had missed his calling, that he could have been the greatest film director of all time. But if you knew Hamster like I did, you knew that was bullshit. He was uncomfortable around carbon-based organisms like people. Silicon and phosphor was his medium, and in it he was without peer. Total control was what he wanted, and with Synthecin he had it. There were no meat people to cajole or baby or egoboo. There was none of the crap that Hollywood cowpunchers had to put up with in even the most trivial cop show. No, Hamster worked with them all — Spencer Tracy, Vivien Leigh, Judy Garland, the Marx Brothers, Karloff, Gable, Cooper, Bogart, whatever novaed stars the studios and their heirs wanted to resurrect — and had no trouble with any of them. He programmed his actroids to laugh — they'd laugh; cry — they'd cry. He got the best writers, costumers, and set designers in the business, hired cinematographers and editors until he learned everything he wanted to know from them, and then, by God, Hamster made movies.

He didn't make them at any fifteen grand a second, either. Hamster's costs were an amazing five hundred dollars a second, which meant that he could roll out finished product from $3 million to $4 million apiece. And it wasn't just cheap; it was *good*.

Of course, the technique itself was incredible — made the stuff they did on the Cray X-MP look like a mono MacIntosh, and made old Max Headroom look like Gertie the Dinosaur. But at the same time, Hamster was a film buff and a purist who hated the Colorization process when it first came out (one reason he never returned Turner's calls). Although he was making new films with actors who never made them in real life, he still wanted to be as faithful to their spirits as possible. So, perhaps not surprisingly, even the critics loved the new "old" films. The first commercial release was a skiffy space opera with Errol Flynn as the captain of a smuggling ship who turns out to really be a commander of the Galactic Patrol. It was Saturday-matinee stuff, but still wonderful, and although Pauline Kael trashed it, everyone else loved it. Hell, Ebert and Siskel devoted a whole show to it.

Hamster went delightedly on, he and his actroids turning out a new film every three or four months. He created the projected but never-made *I Claudius*, with Charles Laughton; did a new Chaplin film with the Little

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Tramp, *A Man of the Streets* (a black-and-white silent, of course); and brought back Lugosi and Karloff for an original screenplay by Stephen King. His biggest hit, of course, was *Rebel With a Cause*, with James Dean and Natalie Wood, which grossed $200 million at the box office, and then sold over one hundred thousand copies on vidcassette.

Through it all, Hamster never changed. Like his namesake, he burrowed into his compound, went out when he had to through his private entrance that even I never saw, dealt reluctantly with the studio people and the free-lancers he hired, and then did the work, all by himself, with never an assistant in sight.

"Hamster," I asked him when we'd finished watching his latest. *One Knight in a Harem*, with W.C. Fields, "how come you never get anybody to help you?"

He gave a wry smile and stood up. "Come on," he said, and led me to what he called the studio, where a vast array of minis, monitors, and disk drives lined the walls. He logged on, the monitors brightened, and Humphrey Bogart appeared on the screens. Bogie just stood there, not moving, not saying a word.

"Whaddya want Bogie to do?"

I thought for a minute. "One of those little salutes of his, you know."

Hamster nodded. "Watch." He began to hit keys faster than I could follow his fingers. At the end of five minutes of key stroking, he hit a big, fat red key; and Bogie grinned, brought his hand up, touched two fingers to the edge of his fedora, and snapped the hand down again. "Wanna try it?" Hamster offered.

I shook my head. "I have no idea what you just did, man."

"Nobody does," Hamster said, "and that's the way I like it. I designed it so it's not user-friendly, Stosh. It is user-fucking-hostile. What it is, is *Hamster*-friendly. Because as soon as somebody goes out that door knowing how to do it, the level will sink to shit. You seen any of those stupid pornos?"

I had. After the Supreme Court rulings in '94 that shut down the Nevada houses and said that performing in pornos constituted prostitution, it all went underground again. Except for the guys in Denver who had come up with a rough imitation of Hamster's work that they were able to sell without fear of the morals laws, since every perversion was digitally synthesized. No real people: no prostitution. In a crude way, they

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were sort of fun, like living eight-pagers of the thirties, with Jimmy Cagney boffing Mae West, or Gable shtupping Harlow. They went current as well. I even saw one called *Strange Bedfellows*, with synthesized re-creations of Jerry Falwell and Justice O'Connor. Intriguing, if a bit geriatric.

"They look like colored mud puddles fucking each other," Hamster went on with distaste in every syllable. "I'm not going to have that happen to my brainchild, Stosh. And I don't think anybody will be able to reproduce this technology for years."

Hamster wasn't bragging. He just had a realistic sense of his own powers. As it turned out, he was right. Even today, nobody's even come close. Nobody except Diane. But that's only because she's Hamster's . . . what shall I say, *heir*! At any rate, she was the only one he could trust, and for sure the only one with enough brains to . . ..

I'm getting ahead of myself. Because Diane didn't come first. *Galatea* came first.

IT WAS around Christmas a few years ago when Hamster called me and told me to come over to the compound. "I got something special, Stosh, really special."

I was glad to hear it. He'd been slowing down, falling behind on production. I knew he was under contract to do a Marilyn Monroe movie, and rumor had it that the due date had come and gone. I was surprised. That wasn't like Hamster. So I thought maybe he'd finished it and wanted me to take a look. He'd never done Marilyn before, so I was looking forward to it.

But I didn't see Marilyn. I sat in his screening room, beer in hand, the lights went down, and up on the giant monitor appeared a woman who made Marilyn look like something that ate Burger Bits. Understatement. To call her beautiful would be like calling Ted Turner a little pushy. She was indescribable, and naturally, having said that, I'll try to describe her.

The film was in the sort of dreamy, washed-out color you associate with the two-color process of the early thirties. It was a costume piece, and she had on a peach dress that left her shoulders bare. Her dark hair hung long, resting on those creamy shoulders like a cape. The features were perfect — the chin, mouth, nose, cheeks, all delectably edible. And those eyes were something, too. They seemed familiar. And gorgeous.

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Words aren't my business — pictures are — but I doubt if I could have come close to capturing her with a brush or a pencil. Nobody could. Except the guy who sat next to me, a dopey, dreamy grin on his face.

We watched and listened to her for a while. She was telling Cary Grant (dressed in a cutaway coat with shiny buttons on it) that it was all over, and that her husband was coming home from some war. I really don't remember *which* war, because her voice as well as her looks hypnotized me. Soft yet strong, and absolutely overwhelming. By the time I started to come to my senses, the film was over. It lasted only a few minutes, but seemed to stretch out, druglike, over hours. The screen went black, and I turned dizzily to Hamster.

"Hamster . . . man, who *is* she?"

"I don't know. I haven't named her yet."

The truth dawned. "Named her? You mean . . . you *made* her?"

He nodded. "It's something I've wanted to try for a long time. It was a bitch, but I think it turned out pretty good."

"Pretty good? Man, I'm in *love*! She's incredible; she's beautiful; she . . ."

"You think she can act?"

"*Act*? I wanted to *weep* when she told that poor schmuck it was all over. I mean, I didn't think I'd *ever* feel sorry for a guy who looks like Cary Grant, but hey . . ."

When I thought about it, I just shook my head, then drank some more beer. "Where'd you *get* her, just out of your head?"

"Pretty much. Everything except the eyes."

"The eyes?" I *thought* the eyes had looked familiar.

"Mmm-hmm. They're the one thing that's most alive. Impossible to create. You can't cheat with eyes. They gotta be real"

Then I remembered. "Garbo. They're Garbo's eyes, aren't they?"

He smiled at me, and I felt pretty damn smart. "You got a good memory, Stosh. Yeah, I synthesized them from Garbo's vids."

I shook my head in admiration of Hamster's genius. "So what are you gonna do with her?"

"Make a full-length feature. I've commissioned a script from Dick Christopher."

Christopher was numero uno in Hollywood. He'd won original-script Oscars two years running. "What about the Monroe film?"

"That'll have to wait. This is too important."

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"You're contracted, aren't you?"

"Hell with it. Let 'em sue me. They haven't paid cent one yet." Then he repeated, "This is too important," and looked back at the now-empty monitor with far-from-empty eyes.

Uh-oh, I said to myself. I could see what had happened.

Bobby Hampshire had fallen in love. It was that simple and that absurd. He had fallen head over heels, unconditionally, and unquestionably in love, just like the adolescent he had never been, like the adult he now was who had never really grown out of adolescence. It struck me as something that could be emotionally fatal, especially if the love was not reciprocated. And how in hell could it be, when the object of his affection was a video projection (to bend the truth for a lyric's sake)? He was in love with pixels. Even being in love with somebody who was *dead* struck me as more productive, for at least that person had once lived, and maybe you could be united in an afterlife. But this — this was like the deaf-and-dumb retard with polio having the hots for the head cheerleader. Futile.

"So, uh, what are you gonna call her?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I've come up with a bunch of names, but nothing seems right."

"How about Galatea?" I suggested, and he caught the allusion.

"That's not bad . . . not bad. I mean, it fits, right?"

So Galatea she became.

With my share of the *Rebel* money, I took off for Europe shortly after seeing Galatea for the first time, fulfilling a dream of my own to see all the great museums and paintings that had inspired me when I was a kid. I dropped Hamster a bunch of postcards, but didn't hear anything in return. When I got back six months later, I gave him a call. He sounded tired as hell, but told me he had something for me to see, so over I went.

It was the Galatea feature. He had finished it, watched it several times, and wanted me to be the first person besides himself to see it. I was honored, and after I saw it, was even more so. I knew then how the first person to see *Intolerance* or *Citizen Kane* or *Potemkin* must have felt. Oh, the script was wonderful, and the direction was sure and sublime, the Synthecin was more stunning than ever — but what was extraordinary was Galatea. To say a star was fucking born doesn't touch it. This was supernova time. She was everything that every film star had ever wanted to be but never was. She was . . . everything.

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The weird thing is that even now I don't remember what the film was about. It was like one of those fantastic dreams you wake up from and curse because you're in the real world again, and you'd give anything if you could just get back into that dream and stay there forever. It was modern dress, and I think it had Robert Taylor in it, or somebody who *looked* like Robert Taylor, and I remember that nobody even touched Galatea in the whole film, but what was important was Galatea herself. She just *stole* you, and I don't think it would have mattered if you were a man or a woman — that's how much charisma she had. But charisma doesn't describe it. If a politician can have it, it isn't what Galatea had.

I couldn't find the words, but he knew I liked it. "When are you going to release it?" I asked

He sat there for a long time, just looking down at the thick rose carpet. "I'm not."

"Hamster, you kidding? That thing must have cost you millions to make, and you spent twice as long on it as you usually do on a film. Besides, it's great. It's untouchable, man. Hell, you owe it to the public —it's too good to keep to yourself. . . ."

And then I slowed down, because I realized that that's exactly what Hamster wanted to do, to keep her all to himself. I'd forgotten for a moment that he *loved* her. He showed her to me with pride, like you'd introduce your fiancée to your best friend, knowing that because he's your best friend, he'd never be a threat.

"I don't know," Hamster said. "I've never done a movie with characters who weren't real people before. Never done one with a created . . ." — he started to say *actroid*, but changed his mind — ". . . *personality* before. I mean, would the public and the distributors go for it? What would the critics think? I just don't know." After a moment he added, "Maybe I ought to make a few more first."

"Hamster, that doesn't make a byte's worth of sense. If you're really concerned, why don't you do what you did with the others — have a bunch of advance screenings and go from there?"

He nodded. "I know, but still. . . ."

"You love her." I shouldn't have said it, but I had to. The time to pull him out of this batty obsession was now, and not after he had a few more months to get further into it.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I guess I do."

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"Really weird, Hamster. She's not there, man. She's nowhere."

"Maybe not now," he said quietly.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. I'm just tired, Stosh. Been at this for days without sleep. Gotta get some rest." He stood up and stretched his skinny arms. "Don't feel you gotta run off. Finish your beer; watch some vids if you want." He nodded toward a cabinet filled with them. "I'm gonna crash for a while." Then he walked out, leaving me alone.

I would have liked to have watched the Galatea film again, but to tell the truth, I was a little freaked by the whole situation, and maybe afraid that I would fall under the same spell that this actroid with Garbo's eyes had cast on poor Hamster. I hoped it was just the tiredness, that he would get over it before long, but I didn't want to watch that film again.

So I shopped through the cabinet, looking for titles that I hadn't seen five times over. Among the classics and the Synthecin films were two that I'd never heard of, the titles scribbled in Hamster's careless scrawl — *Kiss* and *Love*. Curious, I pulled out the boxes, took out *Kiss*, and put it into the slot.

What I saw were Hamster and Galatea. She looked the same as in the other film, but Hamster was an *idealized* Hamster: Hamster as hero, the acne scars invisible, the cowlicks smoothed down, the eyes clear, the whole package wrapped in a tuxedo, framed by a painfully bright wing collar. He had his hands on her arms. They looked at each other for several seconds, and then he drew her toward him and they kissed, the image fading out very slowly.

I ran it ahead several counters, but that was all there was. So I took it out, picked up *Love*, and fed it into the machine's mouth.

In this one, Hamster and Galatea were lying naked together in bed. The room in the vid was dimly lit, but bright enough for me to see them clearly, and to tell that Galatea's body was the equal of that glorious face of hers. There was a lot of kissing and caressing, all of it done gently and lovingly. I've seen a lot of porno in my time, but I felt more aroused by this than by anything I'd ever seen before. It seemed totally spontaneous, which is absurd when you consider that every move, every touch, had to be programmed with the utmost precision, but that's the effect it had — of two people so crazy in love that they'd do anything for each other.

That was the operative word, too. Hamster had titled it just right

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—*Love.* Not for an instant did I doubt that those two people I saw on that screen loved each other, and that was the biggest turn-on of all. While I felt the hots for Galatea, as any man with the proper amount of testosterone would, I also felt happy that Hamster had finally found such a love, knowing at one level that what I saw was a fabrication, but knowing at another that everything *was* real. It was the damnedest feeling, and one I couldn't shake.

Finally the foreplay was over, and Hamster — or his doppleganger —very carefully mounted Galatea . . . .

And the show stopped right there. I don't know whether he couldn't bring himself to go any further, or if he just didn't have the exciting climax on this particular copy, which, I have no doubt, he had fully intended me to see. Otherwise, why would he have claimed he was tired and told me to watch some vids? I had always kidded Hamster about his lack of interest in sex, and I wondered if this was his way of getting back at me.

And then I wondered what it was like to lose your virginity inside a computer, and couldn't help but think that it was a little sad. The Montagues and Capulets were cake compared to this situation. Sure, Hamster had proved he could get next to Galatea, but only in his silicon dreams, man, only in those pixelated dreams.

Hamster's career and reputation started going downhill then. He missed his deadlines, reneged on his contracts, and left in the ozone all the fabled projects he was due to start. He didn't really give a shit, I suppose, since he had more money than twenty Hamsters could have spent, and never cared about the fame he'd achieved among the cognoscenti.

And what was he doing all this time while the world was crying out for more Laurel and Hardy movies? He was making Galatea movies. I know because he had me in to see them. Over the next two years, he made five of them, each one better than the one before; and in each of them, Galatea became more beautiful, more mesmerizing, more brilliant in her acting. There were times when it was impossible for me to believe that Hamster had done it all, but there was no other possibility, just as there was no doubt of his loving her. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that she was the only kind of woman that he ever *could* love. Hamster never really loved anything but machines, and he loved Galatea because

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she was born of a machine. If she had been a real woman, I doubt if he'd have loved her. Hell, he loved her now because he could control her. Whatever he wanted her to do, she did. Just like all the other actroids. It was a weird obsession, but Hamster could afford it, and it seemed harmless enough.

IT STOPPED seeming that way one day a few months later, when I noticed the Healy Biotech truck pulled up outside Hamster's compound. Hamster had never shown the slightest interest in biotekking, but when I entered his sanctum sanctorum, he was unpacking a box filled with test tubes, putting them neatly into labeled racks. He seemed annoyed to see me, and had apparently forgotten that he had invited me over to watch some vids. I asked him what all the tubes were for, but he pretended he hadn't heard, told me that he was sorry, but he was really busy, and why didn't I come back next month.

I was pissed, but tried not to show it. It wasn't until later that I realized what all that stuff was for. When it came to me, I didn't think that it would work in a million years, but I underestimated Hamster. The sonuvabitch would've been good at anything he put his mind to. It was that kind of a brain.

And it was that kind of a brain that I found charred and melted into glop when I sipped over a week later, right after I got Hamster's phone call—

"Stosh, Hamster. I'm going to try something, and I want you to know about it."

It was three in the morning, and my mind was fuzzed. "Yeah. . . What?. . ."

"I'm going to bring out Galatea . . . I think."

"Bring — *what?*"

"Either bring her out or go in after her. I'm not sure which."

Jesus, I thought. A guy in his twenties like Hamster should not mess around with recreational drugs after being a teetotaler for most of his life. "Hamster, listen, man; don't do a thing till I get there, O.K.?"

"It's all right, Stosh. Really. I just wanted to let you know and to say good-bye in case it doesn't work out right."

"*Hamster*! Now just *listen* a minute!"

"Love ya, man," he told me, and hung up.

I jumped into my clothes and my car, roughly in that order, and

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hydroplaned over the ten miles of wet roads to the compound. Deke, the guard, let me in, and we both pounded down the hall to the studio, which Deke unlocked with his key.

Hamster was there. And yet he wasn't. Dripping over the main console and puddling on the floor was a charred mass of what was later identified as human cellular tissue. It didn't take a genius of Hamster's ability to figure out what had happened, and I cried like a baby until the doctor Deke called gave me a sedative. The next day I tried to explain to them what had happened, but they didn't believe it. The coroner's finding was death by electrocution. Electrocution, bullshit. They didn't even find any teeth.

But what they did find, they buried a few days later — Hamster's grieving parents made the arrangements. I went, of course, and as we walked away from the grave, I saw Galatea among the mourners.

I had no doubt that it was she. She was alone, and was walking toward a dark blue nondescript car when I stopped her. She was just as beautiful as she had been on the vids, and for a moment I couldn't say a word. Then I cleared my throat, introduced myself, told her she looked familiar, and asked her who she was.

When she answered, the voice was unmistakably the voice of the woman I had seen and known as Galatea. "My name's Diane Holt," she said. "I was a security guard for Mr. Hampshire."

"A . . . security guard? Where?" I had never seen her before — that much I knew for damn sure.

"At the compound. His private entrance." It made sense. The only person who had ever used it was Hamster. He'd put it in when Synthecin was new and reporters were all over the place.

My God, I thought. My God, poor Bobby. He saw her every day, and fell in love with the girl — which wouldn't have been hard for anyone to do, since she seemed as engaging as she was beautiful — but he couldn't tell her. So he turned her into Galatea, into someone that he *could* love.

The revelation was sad and disappointing at the same time, disappointing because it meant that Hamster wasn't quite as big a genius as I had thought he was. He hadn't really *created* Galatea — he'd used a model, just like he'd modeled the other actroids' performances around their late counterparts.

But damned if I wasn't wrong again.

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The fact that his will split all his property between Diane and me only strengthened my theory that he loved her, and unrequitedly, for she seemed amazed that he would do such a thing, and went through the legal proceedings in a daze. When it was all over, I got a ton of money, and Diane got the compound, the patents, and a ton of money herself. To my surprise, instead of selling the compound, she moved in and started to hack.

Within a year she invited me over to show me a film — a Western with John Wayne, Roy Rogers, and Tom Mix. It was a good one, and I assumed that Hamster had done it before he died, and asked Diane where she had found it.

"I *did* it," she answered.

"You? . . ."

"Oh, Mr. Hampshire left all the instructions — like a road map, really. He wrote a manual that tells how to do it, and a lot of scripts, so all I had to do was program what he'd already planned."

"Do you . . . know computers?"

"It was my major at UCLA, but when I got out, I discovered it was too competitive for my taste, so I got into security."

I nodded, thinking that it sounded fucking goofy enough to be true. But when I got home, I went on-line and checked UCLA's records for the past fifteen years. Sure enough, Diane Holt showed up as a major in CompSci from '88 through '92. Graduated with honors, too. From there I traced her to a year with Tandy, then to a security company out of L.A., and finally to her free-lance assignment working for Hamster. Government files gave me her Social Security number, date of birth (12/20/70), place of birth (Anaheim), and a bunch of other stuff.

But none of it was good enough.

I called Dr. Crimmins at UCLA, identified myself, and asked him if he remembered a Diane Holt from his Advanced Pascal class. He didn't, but when he accessed his mini, there she was. "Isn't that extraordinary?" Crimmins said, and when I asked what was so extraordinary, he told me. "I don't give A's freely, Mr. Grandzinski. In fact, only one or two a semester. I'm just surprised that I don't remember this girl if I gave her an A."

"Dark hair," I reminded him. "Very beautiful."

"That makes it even *more* incredible that I've forgotten her," he chuckled.

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I thanked him, hung up, and drove to Anaheim. Just as I'd suspected, there was no 1843 Pampas Lane where little Diane Holt had grown up. Pampas Lane stopped in the 1600s. Not on computers, maybe. But in real life. Even Diane/Galatea couldn't change real life.

Hamster had done it, after all. He had somehow, through a combination of programming and biotekking (and alchemy, for all I knew) freed Galatea from the phosphor fantasies in which she lived, zapping himself in the process.

Now *that's* love, I said to myself.

And Galatea, creature of the machine, used the machine to establish a history. She had made herself a security guard at the private entrance where no one else but Hamster would have seen her. She had made herself Diane, made herself real.

At least, that's what I thought. And it was O.K. Hamster *wanted* to get her out, and she was out. It wasn't her fault that he'd gotten melted like Margaret Hamilton in *The Wizard of Oz*. And it was O.K. that she got a big, fat part of the estate. After all, she *was* Hamster's offspring.

So I had no hard feelings, and I never confronted her with what I thought. On the contrary, I *liked* Diane, and went to the compound whenever she invited me. There was nothing sexual about it — in fact, I didn't feel at all drawn to Diane the way I had toward Galatea when I'd seen her on the screen. What I had with Diane was a real *friendship*, something I'd never had with a woman before, and something that I really didn't understand until later, when I finally understood everything.

Diane made more movies, told me they were from the shooting scripts Hamster had left behind, and started to release them. They were as successful as Hamster's had been, and just as good. But Diane didn't like the public attention any better than Hamster had, although I was able to talk her into attending a few premieres. She would smile shyly and cling to my arm, as though, I thought, she expected someone to snatch her away back into the digital dimension from which she'd come.

I began to spend more and more time with her. After all, I was one of the idle rich. We watched a lot of old movies — horror and Garbo, the same weird combination that Hamster had favored, played interfic games, and tennis on the courts Diane had built outside the compound.

One evening we were sitting around after dinner, and she asked me if I'd like to see something she'd just finished — a piece of her own. I said

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sure, so she slotted a cassette, turned off the lights, and sat next to me.

I saw a medium long shot of Hamster and Diane walking along a seashore where green lawns stretched down to a white sand beach. A close-up followed of the two of them smiling at each other, touching hands, then starting to walk again. The whole thing was romantic and gauzy, but was so sincere that it fell short of being embarrassing. It was long, though, and I admit to being bored even while I was perplexed by the reason Diane had made it. I looked at her, and was surprised to see that her eyes were fixed on the screen, absolutely gleaming with love.

And I remembered what Hamster had said about eyes — that you couldn't fake them, that they've got to be real.

I knew then that what was sitting beside me hadn't come out of a computer — at least, not all of her — and I wondered if Bobby Hampshire was in there, seeing the world through Garbo's eyes, if he was still alive, caught within that digitalized personality.

The film finally ended, and she turned to me. "Well? What did you think?"

"I'm curious," I said — and I sure as hell was. "Why did you make that?"

"I owe him a lot," she said coolly. "He loved me, after all. I didn't know that he loved me, or how much."

"You wanted me to see it." Just like Hamster wanted me to see *Kiss* and *Love*. "Why?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. You're my friend."

"I was Hamster's friend, too. And I'm your friend because you're a lot like Hamster."

"You think so?"

"The shyness, the films you like, the way you're such a whiz with Synthecin — you're a *whole* lot like Hamster. *Too* much." I walked over to the bar and poured myself a drink. I didn't look at her as I said what I said.

"I was wrong. I should've used my head. A computer can't create a personality — not the kind of AI that could support a living, breathing person. Not even Hamster could make it do that. And there's something else a computer can't do — create new matter. But with biotekking, well, maybe with a smart-enough guy, it could *transform* matter." I drank half the bourbon before I went on. "Hamster bullshit me. He knew he couldn't get into the computer; that's skiffy stuff. And he couldn't merge his mind with Galatea, since she had no mind to merge. No, the only way was to

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biotek her body in place of his, shoot through himself whatever DNA juice Healy cooked up, and bring all those physical specs — including those Garbo eyes — out of the silicon and into Bobby Hampshire. It was a physical change, that's all, and the extra pounds that had been in Hamster's body were what Deke and I found all over the console." I chuckled grimly. "There were no teeth because they became Galatea's teeth — or should I say Diane's?"

Finally I turned around to look at her. She hadn't moved, and there was a small smile on her face. Despite what I knew, I thought she looked beautiful.

"That's quite a story, Stosh," she said. "And who would ever believe it?"

"You would," I told her. "My friend would. And why would I tell anybody else?"

"It's late," she said, and stood up. "And we've got a premier tomorrow. Are you still taking me?"

"Sure," I said, and hugged her good night.

Jesus, I thought while I drove home, how Hamster loved Galatea. He loved her so much that he'd do anything to be with her. And he's with her now. I don't think the physical change bothers him all that much — he was pretty much asexual to start with.

No, what Hamster wanted wasn't sex. It was control, and that's what he's got. He controls Diane's every move, every word, programs her to do whatever he wants her to do. It seems like it ought to be sad, but it's not. Diane is happy. She has her work, and at least one good friend, and that's not going to change.

At least, she seemed happy when I picked her up for the premiere the other night. It was the longest film she's done to date — a sequel to *Gone With the Wind*, with the original cast — and the audience loved it. They made her take seventeen curtain calls, and she looked radiant, as always. She was wearing a black sequined dress. It became her nicely.

And so, I believe, did Hamster.

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Capt. Roger Robert Lovin of New Orleans ("The Cobbler," December 1987) returns with a colorful story about a psychologist who comes to a Caribbean island for a reunion that begins in mystery but all too soon becomes shockingly clear.

WHERE DO WE GO WHEN WE SLEEP?

By Roger Robert Lovin

THE COCOA-COLORED young man shaded his eyes against the morning sun glaring off the Caribbean. Like everyone else on the terminal building's sagging wooden porch, he was watching the landing approach of the thrice-weekly TAN SAHSA flight from La Ceiba, over on the Honduran mainland. Unlike the others, however, young John Bodden was hoping the ancient DC-3 would make it. SAHSA had dropped one of the old birds a month ago, up in the scrub jungle between French Harbor and Strongest Taking, and had pancaked another into the coral right here at the airport less than a week later. The two crashes had generated a morbid spectator sport that now brought idlers and gamblers from all over the island to greet each incoming flight.

They were disappointed this time. The *capitān piloto* brought his antiquated ship down in a picture-perfect landing, then swaggered it up to the terminal in arrogant disdain of the porch vultures. They took it good-naturedly, settled their bets, and ambled out to meet the plane.

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John Bodden stayed on the porch, hands jammed in the back pockets of his jeans, watching his fellow islanders milling about within inches of the still-whirling propellers. He knew all of them, at least by sight, and was related to many. Roatán was a small island, and, until the recent coming of regular air service, had been as isolate and inbred as though it sat in the deep Pacific instead of the Caribbean.

He straightened, relieved. A tall, deeply tanned American with short white hair and beard was getting off the plane. He was dressed in ragged cutoffs and sneakers, and a moth-eaten Tulane University sweatshirt. He spotted John and grinned, showing fine teeth.

John waved and grinned back, then jumped off the porch and trotted out to meet him. "Thank you for coming, sir," he said, pumping the American's hand. "Jesus, you look like a million."

"Bucks or years?" Dr. Peter Maassluis demanded, mock stern.

John took the older man's scuffed duffel bag and led the way toward the airport's unpaved parking lot. "Should I ask how your flight was?"

"Not till I've had a Valium and a couple of Nacionáls. SAHSA: Stay At Home and Stay Alive."

The boy smiled at the old but appropriate joke. "Beer will have to wait until we're in town, sir. The refrigeration's out, here at the airport —"

"As usual."

"— and I know how you gringos are about warm brew."

"That's 'Dr.' Gringo to you, kid. Show some respect for your betters."

"Yes, Bwana." Then, gesturing: "I brought Pop's truck."

"I can't believe that old fossil's still functional."

"Pop or the truck?"

"Tch, tch, John. C plus, at best."

"You always did grade hard, sir."

John threw Maassluis's duffel in the back, and they took off for Coxen Hole, the boy driving with something more than the usual maniacal Third World intensity. He had fallen moodily silent as soon as he'd gotten in the truck, and now flung the old pickup around the potholes, pedestrians, and banana wagons that cluttered the red clay gash bulldozed around the jungle-clad hills just above the beach as if daring fate to intervene and hoping it would. Maassluis watched him obliquely, weighing, judging.

Abruptly they were on the five paved blocks that comprised downtown Coxen Hole, Roatán's official port of entry and administrative center. John

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braked forcefully, slewing the truck around a young peanut vendor and a dog, deep in negotiations, and eased to a stop, motor idling. "Well," he said, his voice too bright, "let's see about that beer."

"It can wait till we get up to the house," Maassluis offered.

John shook his head. "Let's have one here."

Maassluis studied him a long moment. "No problem," he said easily.

The boy was visibly relieved. "Right. Local color, or hedonistic luxury?"

Maassluis made a show of considering. Coxen Hole boasted two hotels with bars: the Coral, patronized by locals and universally known as "El Flea-baggo"; and the Bayside, a tourist operation that, charging an outrageous fifty cents per drink, was known as "El Rip-offo." "Who's paying?" Maassluis asked.

"On me, sir."

"The Bayside," he said firmly, having no intention of letting the boy pay.

With the expertise of long tropical experience, Maassluis chose the right table in the open, dockside bar, directly beneath a revolving fan and in line with the breeze coming in off Coxen Hole's exquisite little harbor. Except for a tourist couple putting desultory makes on each other, they had the place to themselves.

John ordered a Caña de Oro and Coke for himself, and raised an eyebrow to see whether he should make it two. Maassluis shook his head, having had experience with the fiery Honduran rum. "Might spill it on something and be responsible for the damages." He ordered a Nacional, no glass.

They sat in silence while the bartender padded off: John taut, not looking at his older companion, Maassluis studying the boy without appearing to do so. He'd first met John twelve years earlier, when he'd come down on sabbatical to dive Roatán's beautiful reefs. John had been eleven then, a skinny, cheerfully persistent little hustler who'd wheedled him out of the organized posh of Anthony's Key Resort and into a month's laid-back chaos at the Bodden family's homestead, a ramshackle collection of tin-roofed fishing shacks, a mile or so up the beach. The friendships he'd established with the Bodden clan had eventually resulted in his having sponsored young John's undergraduate education at Tulane, and, later, his Master's work at the Institute.

Then John had returned to Roatán to do the fieldwork for his thesis in

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history Ph.D., and Maassluis had become head of the Institute's psychology department, and the two friends' contact had become sporadic. They wrote two or three times a year, and John had come up to New Orleans once, for Mardi Gras. But Maassluis hadn't been down to the island for almost four years now.

Then, yesterday, he'd received John's disturbing telegram.

Urgent you come Roatán immediately. Life or death.

The drinks arrived. John downed his in two searing gulps, coughed, and ordered another. Maassluis took a thoughtful pull at his beer. "O.K, John," he said quietly, "I'm here."

The boy stared at his hands as though they were foreign objects. "Where do we go when we sleep, Peter?"

The psychologist smiled. "Is that a rhetorical question, or has Annalee been asking about me?" Annalee was one of John's numerous sisters. At age nine, twelve years ago, she had been madly in love with "Uncle Doctor Peter."

John did not smile back, and he would not meet Maassluis's eyes. "It's what Pop asked me when I tried to find out why he'd sent the birds away."

Maassluis had started to raise his beer, and now paused with the bottle halfway to his mouth. "When he what?"

"Sent the birds away. All of them." He jerked his head. "Look out there."

The harbor curved away to east and west, a picture-postcard view with jungle coming right down to the beaches. Normally that view included a raucous kaleidoscope of rainbow-hued birds, of parrots and parakeets, macaws and hummingbirds like tiny jewels. There was not a bird in sight now, and Maassluis was suddenly aware of how preternaturally quiet the day was without them. "I'll be damned," he whispered. "What the hell happened here, John?"

"Pop sent them away," he said stubbornly.

Maassluis grimaced. "Come on, John. You're too intell—"

"Four days ago, at 9:45 in the morning." John said levelly, his eyes fixed on Maassluis. "He stood out in the yard and hollered for them. 'Come 'longside here, *pājaros!*' They flew in from all over the island. Thousands of them! When they were all there, all perched in the mango trees and on the rooftops, Pop told them to leave Roatán. 'Leave on out this place, *pājaros.*'

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And they left, every goddamn one of them."

Maassluis heard the ring of absolute truth in the boy's voice. Or at least of absolute belief. He fished Nat Shermans and a lighter from the back pocket of his cutoffs and lit up. "Did anyone actually witness this, ah, event?"

"Me and forty or fifty other people. Most of the old fishermen, and their wives." He leaned across the table, intense. "Pop called *them* in, too."

Then, suddenly, the boy's face collapsed. "There's something really weird happening, Peter, and Pop's either the cause of it or its worst victim. You've got to *help* him, Peter! Help *us!* You've got to. . . ."

He pushed himself back and took a ragged breath. "Sorry, sir. I'm a little spooked."

"No," Maassluis corrected, smiling. "*I'm* spooked. You're *terrified.* And if I can't find out where the damned birds went, I think I'll join you." His tone wasn't quite as light as he'd meant it to be. He looked at his cigarette, then his beer, as if unsure which crutch to lean on. "Christ, I'm not ready for this. I've got departmental budgets coming up, back at the Institute. I haven't done field psychology in ten years. . . ."

John stood up and tossed the truck keys on the table. "Why don't you play tourist this afternoon? Maybe catch a swim. I'll hoof it home and meet you there this evening."

Maassluis looked at the keys. "I assume this is some version of dropping the other shoe?"

"You'll figure it out, sir."

BUT HE hadn't. Sunset found him parked on the crest of Dixon's Hill, the highest point on the spine of hills that divided Roatán's hospitable southern half from Backside, its reef-strewn northern one. The island stretched away beneath him, an achingly beautiful emerald crescent set in a sea of molten wine. But it seemed tinged with menace now as night set in. There *was* something wrong here, something made sinister by its elusiveness. He'd wandered the island all afternoon, all the way from Calabash Bight to West End, talking with people he'd known for years. They'd joked and gossiped, asked after his health and work, but from a distance, as though they saw him through smoked glass. And they wouldn't talk about the missing birds. "They's upside th' other end th' island," they'd said vaguely. "Did Emil sent them

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up there?" he'd asked. "Dat Emil," they'd said, shaking their heads, "he a case."

He'd made a particular effort to talk to some of Papá Emil Bodden's cronies, but all the old fishermen seemed to be "upside th' other end," too. Old Whiley Johnson's daughter had refused to let him in the house, but that had been reasonable enough: he'd seen her kids moving furniture and wrapping dishes and clothes, a common ritual in the endless war between Roatán's aggressive cockroaches and fumigator-armed house-wives.

But there'd been that . . . distance between him and her, too, and Maassluis had become keenly aware that being a friend of the islanders was not the same thing as being an islander. Whatever was happening down here, the islanders had pulled it around themselves and shut out foreigners.

He got out of the truck and walked around behind it to relieve himself. Below him, back south, lights were going on in Coxen Hole. He smiled, his mood momentarily lifting. The lights would go off again about midnight, when the number one generator automatically shut down. A minute or so later, people up the hill would begin throwing coconuts down on the tin roof of the power plant to wake the engineer. Eventually he would come to the door, roundly curse all and sundry, and go crank up the number two generator.

Maassluis's smile faded as he walked back around to the front of the truck. Lights were beginning to appear up and down Backside, too, in isolated little clusters marking hillside shacks and fishing camps strung like beads along the romantically named bays and lagoons. Almost directly below him, the Bodden clan's clearing lay in a tiny bay between Man O' War Passage and Hottest Sparrow Channel. He could see their long, rickety fishing pier lined with cayucos, the colorfully painted dugout canoes from which Roatán's fishermen plied their trade.

Always before, that clearing had been a welcome sight.

He shivered in the suddenly chill wind, and realized that night was upon him. What was waiting down there? Reason, training, and instinct told him that Papá Emil Bodden could have had nothing to do with the undeniable disappearance of Roatán's birds. But as he started the truck and eased it down off the crest of the hill, he could not shake the feeling that the night had crawled into the vehicle with him.

The road went down Backside in a series of switchbacks cut through

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stands of papaya and mango and banana, fields overrun with wild melon and peanut vines. Here and there, unmarked sets of ruts led off into the fecund darkness. At the base of the hill, Maassluis turned onto one of these and almost ran over a wide-hipped Creole girl in a white Sunday-best dress who'd planted herself firmly in his way. She climbed in with the boneless grace of the young when he stopped, and scooted across the seat against him. "You've, ah, grown, Annalee," he said.

She put her hands in her lap, self-consciously proud. "John-John sayed you comin'. I waits you two hours."

"Out here?" he asked teasingly, putting the truck in motion again. "Weren't you afraid the Boogrums would get you?" To the islanders, the unseen spirits were as real as the mango trees.

"Ain't no more Boogrums," she said serenely. "Papá send 'em away."

He threw her a quick look. "Like he sent the birds away?"

"Um-hmm."

Maassluis swung the truck around a fallen tree — it had lain there for ten years, and the road had moved to oblige it. "Has Emil sent . . . anything else away, Annalee?"

She shook her head. Then, coyly: "He bringin' stuff now, like he brung you. You gits to come inside wif us despite you ain't of th' Blood, so's you can excape th' Boogrums."

The track became a tunnel through the dense banana trees, and Maassluis had the illusion that he was driving straight downward, toward the center of the earth. "Inside?"

"Where we goes when we sleeps." She laid a slim brown hand possessively on his arm. "I could sleep wif you when we goes inside, Unca Peter, was you to ast."

The proposal was erotic, but Maassluis realized that she meant "sleep" in the literal sense, as John had earlier. Questions stumbled over themselves in his mind, as if stepping out above a chasm of unknown depth and dimension. Sleep? Of the Blood? What the *hell* had Emil gotten started down here?

He became aware that Annalee was watching him expectantly. "I'll, uh, think about it, sweetheart."

She squirmed on the seat, pleased.

A last turn brought them out of the tunnel of banana trees and into a hard-packed clearing, scattering goats and chickens and mongrel dogs

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who slunk away, their eyes glowing red in the headlights like demon lamps. *Quit that,* he ordered himself. *You know this place.* It didn't help. Across the clearing the Bodden house, a great ramshackle building high on knobby stilts, brooded like a hunchbacked insect, its rusted-tin roof the color of old blood in the starlight.

He killed the lights and engine. Annalee flowed over him, hard little breasts insistent, lips demanding. "You ast Mamã can I sleep 'longside you."

"Annalee, this isn't the ti—"

"You ast!" Then she was off across the clearing with the high step of the huntress sure of her prey.

Maassluis got out, too. The jungle closed in, palm fronds looming down like spider fingers. He put a hand on the truck as if for reassurance, annoyed but unable to stop himself. Where was everybody? By now he should be knee-deep in kids or smothered in Mamã Gloria's massive embrace. The big house was dark save for a single light in the kitchen and the gray glow of a television set through one open window. Maassluis strained to hear. ". . . deepening crisis drew the expected response from Capitol Hill, where. . . ."

He smiled in the darkness, the ground surer beneath him. Cable had come to Roatán a few years ago, and now the big dish atop Comstalk's Hill brought even these isolated people the scandal, just breaking as he'd left New Orleans, of a United States congressman caught bankrolling a cocaine operation. Not even the Boogrums, he thought, ironically comforted, could compete with the nightly news.

A screen door banged back, and John came down the stairs and across the clearing, carrying two bottles of beer still wet from the ice bucket. His smile looked as though it would crack if he moved his mouth too quickly. Maassluis wondered how his own looked. John handed him a bottle. "Real stuff. Coors."

"You peddling Annalee to the gringos again, or what?"

"Had to give it up. She kept calling the customers 'Uncle Peter' at the wrong moment." He popped the cap expertly against the truck's fender. "I trade for them, over at Anthony's. One lobster, one Coors."

They stood in the close tropical night while companionable goats nuzzled their hips, each reluctant to initiate whatever came next. It was Maassluis who finally cleared his throat. "Remind me to change after-

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shave lotions. This is the first time I've ever pulled in here without getting mobbed."

John stared off into the darkness. "Mom and the other old ladies are down the beach, having a Hallaloo with the fishermen's kids." Then: "Well, the *old* fishermen's kids."

"Let me guess. Those of the Blood."

The boy nodded. "Yep. All the younger parents are in French Harbor and Strongest Taking with *their* kids, having a Hallaloo of their own at the Adventist Church." He bent to scratch a goat. "Pop's taking everybody inside tomorrow, just before the Boogrums come back."

Maassluis finished his beer and offered the bottle to one of the goats, which accepted the gift with dignity. "I think I'm getting the shape of it."

"No," the boy said firmly, "you're not." He finished his own beer and set the bottle on the truck's hood. "Take a walk?"

He led the way down to the beach, both men pretending to be unaware of Annalee watching from the house's high porch, obviously restrained from following them only by Mamá Gloria's order. Off west, Maassluis could see a bonfire built just above the tide line, with old ladies sitting around it like graceful mounds returning to the earth, and laughing children darting back and forth, the boys leaping like unleashed dares through the edges of the flames. The women were singing "Amazing Grace" in soft, resonant voices, and Maassluis realized that they were saying good-bye.

"Take your swim this afternoon?"

"Yes," Maassluis said, wanting to go among those lovely old women, but allowing himself to be led the opposite way. "No Signs and Portents, though, if that's what you're asking."

"Think about it, Peter."

Maassluis did, then shook his head. "Nope. There were a couple of porpoises in the bay, and maybe a few more fish than usual. But that's just because nobody was chasing them. All the boats were tied up, just like they are. . . ." He stopped short. The Boddens' long fishing pier was solidly lined with cayucos. ". . . here."

John picked up a seashell and shied it into the lagoon. "Every canoe on the island is tied up," he said quietly. "Four or five hundred of them, all up and down Backside. Nobody ordered it done. Just, all at once the old boys hauled in their lines and brought them in." He fixed Maassluis with his eyes. "All at *once*, Dr. Maassluis, at exactly 9:45 last Saturday morning.

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The same moment that Pop sent the birds away."

"Easy," Maassluis cautioned, though whether for the boy's benefit or his own was unclear. "Prearranged signal."

John shook his head. "Won't wash. Half those old boys have never even *seen* a watch, let alone owned one. And some of them were thirty miles apart — hell, Nigel Clabber was the other side of Pig Clay. And they all started in at the same moment. I checked!"

"There's a logical explanation, John," Maassluis said. "There always is."

The boy gave him a look bordering on disgust.

"O.K., O.K.," Maassluis said, running a frustrated hand through his close-cropped white hair. "Do you have any idea *why* they brought the canoes in?"

"Yes," he said levelly. "The Elder Brothers told them to."

"Oh shit," Maassluis said softly. "This is worse than I thought."

"It's worse than *that*, Peter. Pop's going to put the *kids* in the cayucos. Push them out in the lagoon for the Elder Brothers, who are going to 'save' them." The boy rocked back and forth, shifting his weight, his bare feet making sucking noises in the wet sand, his face taut and troubled. "It's not just an end-of-the-world thing, Peter, and it's not just Pop. All those old guys came in last Saturday claiming they'd heard the Elder Brothers speaking to them, in their heads. And where did the damned birds go?" He looked a plea at Maassluis. "That's why I called you."

Maassluis stared at the cayucos bobbing alongside the fishing pier as if having restless dreams, feeling an obscure urge to throw something at them. "I think it's time I talked to Emil."

"Yes, sir, I think it is. How's your balance?"

Maassluis frowned, then turned to stare at a cliff face a kilometer up the beach, formed when the front half of one of the big hills had slid down into Turtling Bay. Halfway up the cliff, a rocky ledge protruded. "What's he doing up at Watchpoint?"

"Waiting for you."

They worked their way up the cliff's face on a trail that was treacherous even in daylight, John leading and Maassluis trying not to think about it. He'd been up here before. The rock ledge had been used by the semi-piratical seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sea rovers who'd plied the Caribbean to keep lookout for schools of fish, migrating humpbacks, and unwary merchantmen. Most of Roatán's population descended from those

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hard-barked men, Maassluis knew — the Boddens from a rough old monster who'd styled himself Lord Harry, and who'd had the habit of publicly consorting with animals whenever he grew tired of his wife and numerous mistresses. This tale, which Maassluis had inadvertently let slip at Tulane, had made young John the butt of endless cruel humor during his undergraduate days. But it and similar stories had provided him with the basis for his current doctoral work on the history of his complex and inbred family. "We don't chase goats anymore," he'd once told Maassluis, "but we're still a pretty strange bunch."

Strange enough, Maassluis thought, climbing over the lip and onto the windswept shelf, to have frightened its brightest and best-educated member. Not to mention his ex-teacher. He stood and took a deep breath, then saw John watching him expectantly. He turned. "Well, I will veritably be damned."

At the back of the shelf stood a huge boulder known as Don't Forget Rock, so called because a passing whalerman had scratched his home port and a harpoon into it, along with the date of 1717 and the enigmatic admonishment *Don't Forget*. Literally thousands of names had been added since then, some carved by the iron men who, with cannon and cutlass, pistol ball and harpoon and fishhook, had coursed the Mar Caribe in pursuit of wealth, opportunity, and each other. More, like Maassluis's own, had been scratched into the rock by softer men, armed with tourist visas and deadly Instamatics.

From time immemorial the great rock had stood against the hillside at the back of the shelf. Now it had been rolled aside at some incalculable cost in human will and muscle, to reveal the secret it had guarded, a wedge-shaped fissure. Far back under the earth, yellow light showed as if down a tunnel.

John made a be-my-guest gesture, and followed Maassluis into the mountain.

Thirty feet in, the fissure widened to become a sizable cave, its far end lost in darkness. Closer at hand, old men worked by the light of kerosene lanterns, sorting and stacking great stores of canned goods, dried coconuts, bales of fodder, sacks of grain. The odor of dried fish was heavy. The old men smiled friendly, unsurprised greeting, but did not speak, as though Maassluis no longer existed in any important sense. Almost, but not quite, they had the detached look of the True Believer, the self-mesmerized

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How far had he strayed into the dark and whispering world of delusion?

faithful. Almost. And it was that difference that bothered the white-bearded psychologist.

John took him back. The cave was much bigger than it had first appeared, a true cavern system with branches and galleries leading off into the eternal night of the underground. Down one of these, water dripped heavily into a deep pool. Down another, Maassluis glimpsed what looked to be red handprints on one wall.

They reached a doorway and stepped into a large room hewn from the solid rock. It was filled with furniture Maassluis recognized, around and among which were neatly stacked cartons of personal belongings, household utensils, old chests and barrels. On the wall behind Annalee's bed hung a framed picture of a younger Peter Maassluis with a younger Annalee on his lap.

Emil Bodden sat on one of the old barrels, mending a child's doll. He smiled with genuine pleasure. "Spell yourself, young Peter," he said, indicating a nearby barrel. Then, to John: "Fetch a fresh-up, Son."

Maassluis sat on the barrel, unconsciously wary, unnerved as always by the immense vitality his old friend projected. Emil Bodden was well into his eighties, all wire and sinew and fisherman's calluses, but you'd have to look hard to give him sixty, and his youngest son was only four years old.

But how vital was his mind now? How far had he strayed into the dark and whispering world of delusion? More important, Maassluis thought, how thoroughly had he worked out his fantasy? Emil Bodden was a powerful and charismatic man whose lack of education did not impede his quick intelligence. How hard would he fight reality? How hard would he make it for Maassluis to bring him back?

Maassluis suddenly became aware that the old man's intense Creole-green eyes were on him, quietly self-assured, sympathetic, and disturbingly rational. " 'Speck you seen Annalee," Emil said, trying to help him.

The psychologist nodded. "She ambushed me at the turnoff."

"They a trial, 'bout that age."

"At any age," Maassluis said, thinking of his own daughter, now on her

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third husband and umpteenth change of careers in Los Angeles.

John brought coconut milk for the two older men, then tried unsuccessfully to make himself inconspicuous, silently demanding a miracle.

Maassluis looked around the rock-walled room, as if seeking a starting point. "It's a wonder you boys didn't break your necks, getting all this stuff up the cliff."

"Run it up wif block 'n tackle," the old man said, "way they used to do it." He smiled. "Long time we knowed this cave, Peter. *Long* time. Only, we forgot we knowed it till th' Elder Brothers 'membered it to us, last Saterday."

"I see," said Maassluis, relaxing slightly. This was getting into territory he could handle. "And how did the, ah, Elder Brothers 'remember' . . . all this . . . to you? Voices in your heads?"

Emil laid aside the doll he'd been mending as gently as if it had been the child to whom it belonged. He indicated the barrel on which Maassluis sat. "Lookit upside that cast, Peter, what it says."

Obligingly, he bent forward, hands on knees, to study the cask. "Let's see . . . it's, ah — damn, this is *old* Spanish — it's Barbados rum, kegged in 1749." He blinked and squinted at the date again, then peered around at the other old barrels. Ship's casks, all of them, and all with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century dates. He whistled softly.

Emil leaned forward and pointed. "That cast you on was made by Nigel Clabber's fambly, way back. I can read th' froe marks plain as you reads th' Spanish writin'. See them two staves 'longside your knee? They come off a whaler as was later sunk — see hows they dark wif sparm oil, then bleachy from salt water? An' them gnaws on th' lower bindin' hoops is from N'Allins rats — that cast was wharfed-up there, oncet. *Stole* oncet, too; that devil-horn scratched next th' bung was Blackjack Watlin'ton's mark."

He leaned even closer, his powerful eyes on Maassluis. "*That's* how th' Elder Brothers tol' us, Peter. Wif stuff that's deep-knowed, like we knows how to read old casts, an' weather, an' currents innit ocean."

Maassluis studied his old friend, wishing he were a psychiatrist rather than a psychologist. Emil Bodden accepted his scrutiny with the leather patience of a mummy. Maassluis cleared his throat. "I understand the Elder Brothers have instructed you to put the kids out into the lagoon before you old fol — you, ah, people of the Blood come inside the cave here. Did they tell you why you're supposed to do that?"

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Emil nodded. "Gon' save th' young'uns, like they did last time. That's 'cause way, *way* back, we saved *them* oncet."

"Save the kids from what, Emil?"

"Th' cold. Big cold comin', Peter. Worse 'n last time, freeze up all th' way down here. Kill most ever'body, ever'thing."

"Big cold? You mean like an ice age or something?"

"Yes. Worse this time, though."

Maassluis smiled. "They way you said that, Emil, it sounds like you remember the last ice age."

"I do."

Maassluis threw a quick glance at John, who lowered his eyes as if embarrassed for his father. Maassluis felt a sudden rush of empathy for both men, and a determination to help them. "Emil," he asked carefully, "do you have any idea how long an ice age lasts?" As if for emphasis, he looked skeptically around the rock-walled room.

"We ain't stupid, Peter," the old man said quietly. "We don't 'speck to last it out. We just wants to hold on long as we can, since we's too old to go wif th' chirren."

The statement was so bleak, so filled with dignity and fatalism, that it cracked Maassluis's resolve and perhaps his heart. He sighed heavily. "I'm sorry, Papá Emil. It's just that this is all . . . a little hard for a man like me to swallow."

The old man smiled sympathetic amusement. "Wouldn't believe it myself, was I you." He reached over and patted Maassluis's knee, as though the psychologist were a beloved but not especially bright child. "It's books does that to you, Peter. Lookit my boy John there. *He's* of th' Blood, same as I am. Only, he's got so many books innit head he cain't reach th' deep-knowed stuff no more. Same wif most of th' young'uns his age. That's why it's only us old folks as heard th' Elder Brothers, an' only th' littlest young'uns as th' Brothers is gon' save."

"What about Annalee?" John blurted from a corner. "She claims *she* heard . . . whatever it is you guys heard."

"She a simple chile," Emil said gently. "Books never got her."

This time both John and Maassluis found it expedient to stare at their own feet.

Emil picked up the broken doll and began working on it again. "What you 'bout to ast, young Peter, is why I send away th' *pájaros*." He smiled at

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the psychologist's look of startled confirmation. "It's 'cause of th' Boogrums. They comin' back tomorrow. Ever'thing as can't come inside got to get out they way or perish."

"I see," Maassluis said again, not seeing at all. He caught himself worrying the hair on his leg, a displacement motion, and willed himself to stop. He was tired and more than a little rattled. Too much input, not enough time to sort it out. Still. . . .

"Tell me about being 'of the Blood,' Emil."

"Be more correct to say *bound* by th' Blood, I 'spose. Oh, we's fambly, if you goes far 'nough back. But what makes us Brothers is *spilt* blood, ours 'n theirs. They's hunted us, an' we've hunted them. But allus wif love."

That last threw him, and Maassluis realized how very tired he was. There were a million more questions to ask, and infinite work in the offing, but he had the outline of it now, and the rest would wait until tomorrow. He stood and stretched conspicuously. "I think I need some sleep, Papá Emil. I'll go down to the house now, and we'll talk more in the morning."

"I 'speck we will," the old man said, his face showing private amusement. He turned to his son. "Fetch a coal-oil lamp an' see young Peter safe down th' trail. Then come back up. We got a peck of work yet."

"Sure, Pop." He hesitated a moment, then bent and kissed his father's leathery cheek. "It's going to be all right, Dad. Dr. Maassluis. . . ." Embarrassed and frustrated, he left to get a kerosene lantern.

Maassluis stood a long moment, looking down at his old friend. "It *is* going to be O.K., Emil," he promised.

The fisherman's eyes were calm. "We's made room for you, Peter. We gots food an' water, an' air as comes from deep down. We'll last a long spell in here."

Maassluis looked for something to say, but could find nothing. Nodding, he left to join John.

A sickle moon had risen, its wan light only emphasizing the precariousness of the trail. They went down the cliff face in silence, intent upon their selves and their survival. At the base of the cliff, they found boiled crabs wrapped in newspaper. *I wates you up* was scrawled on it in pencil and signed with a drawn heart. "Have to chain Annalee in the shed tonight," Maassluis mumbled, semiembarrassed.

"Wouldn't help. She dedicated her puberty to you, eight years ago."

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"Must have been hard on the local boys."

"Not to mention the goats."

They started back down the beach toward the house, John kicking nervously at the sand, Maassluis working on the crabs. John let him get through two of them, knowing he was analyzing the meeting in the cave, but could contain himself no longer than that. "Well?" he asked, near the thin edge of control, "can you help him?"

Maassluis worried a crab claw with his teeth. "There's a tribe in the South Pacific that got exposed to the concept of plate tectonics a couple of years ago. Now they're building themselves airtight boxes as a hedge against the earth's flying apart."

John looked at him blankly.

"It's television. It brings 'Nova' and Von Däniken's derivative crap to nontechnological people, without caring that they haven't the cultural or educational background to differentiate between them. Now their doom scenarios are beginning to feature invasions by Our Masters from the Crab Nebula — and new ice ages."

John's eyebrows rose. "Ahh," he said softly.

"Emil's got a pretty standard thing going here. Sort of end-of-the-world script number 247-B. It's quite common among people who feel powerless to prevent their culture's being steamrolled by more technologically powerful forces."

"You mean, Pop and the old guys are . . . what? Giving up? . . . as a kind of ultimate protest?"

Maassluis spit crab shell and nodded. "Moreover, they're doing it in a culturally consistent manner."

John shook his head. "I must be extra dense tonight."

"They're fishermen, and fishermen are a lot like farmers. They protect their seed at all costs."

"Putting their kids out in the cayucos?"

"Gold star, chum. The heavens part, the Elder Brothers come down and take the 'seed' straight to the safe and glorious future Emil can't guarantee them, and the old boys crawl into their cave, where they can shut out a world grown hostile and alien."

John laughed, not really relieved, but more confident now. "You make it sound so simple."

"That's why I'm a rich and famous psychologist, m'boy, and you're a

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lowly historian."

"*That* bothers me, too. There's enough psych in history that I should have seen this coming, figured it out for myself."

Maassluis finished the last crab, crumpled the greasy newspaper, and tossed it into the surf, knowing it would be appreciated by the fierce little denizens of that rolling world. "Physicians don't treat themselves or their own families, John. When you are emotionally involved, it clouds your vision."

They'd come abreast of the fishing pier, and Maassluis had the sudden, disturbing thought that the restless cayucos tied up along it were taxis awaiting fares to oblivion.

"What about the parrots, sir? And all the old guys hearing the voices at the same time? How do you explain that?"

"That's a grayer area," the psychologist admitted. "I suspect the thing with the birds involves parapsychology, and we don't know a hell of a lot about that field yet. But there's good documentation of the ability to control wild animals by willpower, even to the extent of calling birds out of the air.

"As for the timing thing last Saturday, that's undoubtedly part of the shared delusion. Emil's a charismatic and powerful man, John. He may have been setting up this Elder Brothers number for the past five years, all unaware that he was doing so. And the other old guys went along with it, willing themselves to believe because they had no alternative."

They'd reached the path up to the Bodden clearing, and both stopped, looking off down the beach. The bonfire had burned low, and most of the younger children were huddled around it, but the placid old ladies were still singing hymns. "Jesus," John said, his voice bleeding, "this is going to kill the old folks. They'll be the laughingstocks of the island."

"Don't sell them short," Maassluis said quietly. "Or me. They'll come out of this a lot better able to deal with reality."

The house was completely dark except for the still-glowing television set. The sound had been turned down, but the same anchorman, looking the worse for wear, was on camera. The congressman must really have stuck his foot in it, Maassluis thought, to be getting all-night coverage.

Annalee lay curled on the bare floor in front of the set, still in her Sunday-best dress, her breathing slow and regular. Maassluis wasn't sure whether he was relieved or disappointed.

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Being the eldest unmarried child still living at home, John slept in what the islanders euphemistically referred to as the Gettin' Acquainted Parlor, a screen porch with its own discreet outside entrance. "Why didn't we come this way in the first place?" Maassluis whispered.

"Annalee nailed the door shut this afternoon."

The room, like the rest of the house, was bare, all the furniture having been hauled up to the cave. But Annalee had spread a banana-frond mattress and covered it with a fresh sheet, and had put Maassluis's duffel bag in place of a pillow. "It ain't the Ritz," John apologized.

"No problem. I could sleep on a bed of nails." He shucked out of his ratty and much-beloved Tulane sweatshirt, then paused, studying his young friend's face. "What is it, John?"

The boy looked embarrassed. "I don't mean to sound critical, Peter, but it seemed like you were just going through the motions up there. I mean, it was all so fast." He regarded the psychologist with something between fear and hope. "You *are* going to . . . save them, aren't you?"

"Absolutely," Maassluis said, stepping out of his cutoffs and sneakers. "But not just yet."

"Sir?"

Maassluis dropped onto the mattress and groaned with pleasure as he stretched and wiggled himself comfortable. "This thing will self-correct, John." He got out his cigarettes, lit one and laid back against his duffel, fingers laced behind his neck. "Emil said the Boogrums are coming back tomorrow, which means this whole thing is going to come down then, right?"

"That's what I gather."

"So picture the scene on the beach. The old folks collect down there. They sing and pray and dance the limbo or something, and put the kids in the canoes. What happens then?"

John frowned, then his face lit with comprehension.

"Right," Maassluis said. "The kids paddle around out there until they get tired or bored or hungry, and—"

"They jump in the lagoon and start playing, like they always do."

"*Exactamente*, kiddo. And the old folks have to admit that the skies haven't parted, the trumpets haven't sounded, and the Elder Brothers are out for a pizza. That's when *I* go to work. Compassion, understanding, and a heavy dose of reality therapy."

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"Yeah," the boy said, doubtful again, "but what if the old folks don't stick around, after they do their Moses-in-the-bullrushes thing with the kids? What if they just go on up to the cave and roll Don't Forget Rock back in place?"

"Same result, just takes a couple more days. We fish the kids out of the lagoon and take them home; then, a day or so later, we go knock on the cave and invite Emil to come out and explain why we're all still here."

John thought about it a long minute, then grinned shyly. "Thanks, Doc. I needed that."

"Pay the receptionist on your way out."

"Speaking of which," he said, bending to retrieve the kerosene lantern, "I'd better get back up the hill. Pop's expecting me."

"Pops are like that."

John offered a diffident "See you in the morning," and left.

Maassluis lay in the darkness, smoking thoughtfully and listening to the night murmur of the jungle outside. He'd made a point of being confident for John because the boy so desperately needed reassurance. But he was too professional and too honest to try fooling himself. There were a lot of people in trouble here, people floundering in deep water for which there were few charts. Sure, there were documented cases of people able to call birds out of the air. But every bird on an island, and from thirty miles distant? Where was the literature on *that?* And while his training as a psychologist allowed him to see the shape of Emil's delusion, and to understand how it had developed, it didn't tell him what to *do* about it. Was he competent even to arrest this fantasy until he could send for one of his psychiatric colleagues? Hell, would *they* know how to deal with a hundred old people in the grip of such a powerful delusion? Maassluis felt the weight of his ignorance pressing down on him, felt his skill and training and proud logic smothering beneath the weight of ancient fetid magics.

Then a more important magic imposed itself as a naked brown form glided into the room and sank atop him. "Tol' you I waits you up," she said, softly triumphant.

IT WAS late morning before an insistent bladder pulled Maassluis out of languorous sleep and rolled him off a mat still vibrant with last night's enthusiasms. He stretched and yawned, immensely self-satisfied, and pulled on his shorts. He was just stepping into his

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sneakers, when the day stopped him. He peered through the screen, squinting at a scene as brilliant and sharp-edged as a Gauguin painting. What was wrong out there?

He straightened slowly as it registered. The animals were gone. Not a chicken or goat was to be seen. The clearing was still and silent, and so was the house. Excitement scratched his stomach as he dove into his duffel bag for his Nikon. This was it. What a paper he'd write!

He trotted through the house, hoping he wasn't too late, smiling as he noted that not even the end of the world had prevented Mamá Gloria from leaving the place spotlessly clean. The smile faded as he saw that, for the first time ever, no one had set out a breakfast plate of fried fish and plantains for him, and it hit him that Mamá Gloria Bodden was old, as much "of the Blood" as Emil. She was not going through some ritual to humor a beloved husband: she had left this house with no intention of returning.

He went out onto the porch and was halfway down the stairs, before another incongruity stopped him. They'd left the television on. But that's not what had caught him. He went back inside, moving with a kind of intuitive caution. What th . . . ? The same newsman was still on camera, looking haggard and frightened. Maassluis turned up the sound. "—mong the more bizarre reactions to this crisis, children in fishing villages around the world are being set adrift in small boats. For a live report on this phenomenon, we go to Cape Race, Newfoundland, where correspondent —"

Maassluis took off for the beach at a dead run.

Halfway there he met John, his face ashen, running toward the house. "You'd better come quick, sir," the boy gasped.

"Calm down," Maassluis snapped, for both their benefits. Then, keeping his tone light: "Let's show a little professional dignity here, kid. Impress the natives." They set out at a barely restrained walk with no visible dignity to it. "O.K., John, what's happening down there?"

The boy took a shaky breath, getting control. "They went up to the cave: all the old folks and Annalee. Then Pop came back down with Whiley Johnson and Old Man LeGrand. They brought one of those oil barrels, and a spear, and —"

"A what?"

"A spear! A goddamn wooden spear they'd found in the cave. Flint point

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and all, right out of Africa or the Old West or something."

"All right."

"Then Pop marched all the kids onto the pier, pricked their palms with the spear, made them bleed a little into the barrel, and had Whiley and LeGrand put them in the cayucos." The boy licked his lips and ran a trembling hand through his hair. "Then he told the kids to lie down and go to sleep, and they did! Just lay down and started snoring."

"All of them?" Maassluis asked, incredulous.

"From the diaper babies right up to Squint Thatcher's twins."

"Probably some soporific in the oil or on the spear."

John gave him a skeptical look and held up his hand to show a shallow cut across the palm. "Then why didn't it work on me?"

Maassluis shrugged. "Maybe Emil's right. Too many books in your blood."

They came out onto the beach. Emil Bodden stood on the pier fifty meters distant, spear in hand, watching as Whiley Johnson and Grandpa LeGrand pushed cayucos out into the lagoon. Sleeping children lay like forgotten packages in the boats, the little girls like brown flowers in their starched dresses. "I'd better put a stop to that," John said. "Those kids could drown if the cayucos swamp." He broke into a run. After a moment's hesitation, Maassluis trotted for the pier.

Emil smiled as he came up, but kept his eyes on John, who was yelling at the two old men and swatting at a dolphin that seemed to want to play. "Mornin', young Peter," he said companionably.

Slightly winded, Maassluis took a moment to gather himself. "You've got to stop this, Emil," he said firmly. "You're endangering those children. Whatever you're doing, call it off."

The old man shook his head. "First place, it ain't *me* doin' it, so I can't call it off. Second place, I wouldn't, even iffen I could."

Maassluis opened his mouth in angry retort, then winced as a thunderclap of distant sound struck them. He glanced up, irrationally fearful of seeing trumpet-bearing angels, and was relieved to see nothing more common than a northbound jet's contrail. "Listen, Emil," he said urgently, "this has gone far eno—"

John Bodden's scream razored the air. "Jesus! Oh Jesus! They're not breathing!" He was chest-deep in the lagoon, holding a cayuco against the outgoing tide and beating at Whiley Johnson, who was trying to pull him

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away. He looked beseeching terror at Maassluis. "Help me, Peter! The kids aren't breathing!"

Maassluis lunged for the edge of the pier, but Emil was faster, clamping an iron-strung hand on his arm. Maassluis whirled, fists tight, then froze. Emil's eyes were calm and sympathetic, but implacable. He held the spear's needle point lightly against Maassluis's throat. "Leave it be, Peter," he said softly.

Maassluis shuddered, aware that he was confronted by lethal madness, horrified by the very reasonableness in the old man's penetrating green eyes. "John," he yelled, careful not to move. "Get to Coxen Hole. Bring help!"

"Too late," Emil said, stepping back. "Th' Elder Brothers is already on they way." He lowered his weapon and reached out. "Gimme your hand, Peter."

Somehow unable to resist those terrible, intense green eyes, Maassluis extended his hand. Emil turned it palm up and gently, precisely, incised it with the spear.

No. Not a spear, Maassluis saw, the hackles rising on his neck. A harpoon, ancient, with a flint-edged bone head.

"Been in th' fambly since 'fore th' last freeze-up," Emil said conversationally, holding Maassluis's bleeding palm above the open wooden barrel. The oil in it was a greasy pink now. "They used to hunt *us*," he said, "way back when all of us was crooky an' four-legged. An' sometimes we'd save 'em from th' lizards." With the same careful patience, he cut his own calloused palm. "They 'membered that, after they went back home. Now we hunts *them*, but they understand. Twicet before they've saved our young'uns. Oncet when th' fireball hit an' took th' lizards, 'fore we was rightly men, an' agin durin' th' last big cold." He glanced away north. "Worse, this time, though. This time, th' Boogrums is loose."

Even as Maassluis followed the old fisherman's gaze, the sky turned an impossible actinic white.

Emil nodded as if in satisfaction. "First come th' heat, then th' big cold."

Maassluis staggered back. The jet contrail! The television! "Wrong crisis," he mumbled, as if chastising himself. "God above, it's nuclear war!"

"'Speck that's Havana," Emil said briskly. "We be gettin' some pretty fierce waves, 'long 'bout nightfall." He shook the last drops of blood off his hand, then tilted the barrel and rolled it off the side of the pier with a

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heavy splash. The greasy pink oil dispersed rapidly. "You can git on up to th' cave if you wants, young Peter. Annalee's waitin'. I'll be 'long directly."

But Maassluis wasn't listening. There were suddenly an enormous number of porpoises and dolphins in the lagoon. They darted through the blood-tinged oily water near the pier as if seeking confirmation, then went rolling and leaping to bump the cayucos full of limp children into the deeper water near the reefs.

Another flash of light, away south behind Roatán, seared the sky, etching the island's shadow on the sea. "That'd be th' Mexican army base, over at Trujillo."

It almost didn't matter. Maassluis stood transfixed, his face suffused with terror and wonder.

"Ahh," said Emil Bodden, "they's here." Then, reverently: "Ain't they beautiful, young Peter? Ain't th' Elder Brothers just beautiful?"

"Yes," said Dr. Peter Maassluis, tears streaming down his face. "Oh God, yes."

They came through the breaks in the reefs, rolling like mighty gray and black islands, the spume of their breath an iridescent glory on the air. They came, led by bulls as massively patient as glaciers, the calves close by their mothers' flanks. Their great jaws opened to receive the children as the porpoises tipped the cayucos, one by one, and they took the sleeping brown future of their younger brothers, bound in blood, into their great mouths.

"They got fambly names," Emil Bodden said, "just like us."

And then they were gone, the dolphins and porpoises leaping after, and the five who could not go with them stood alone on the beach of a tiny Caribbean island while the Fifth Horseman of the Apocalypse, streaming nuclear fire, galloped through the cold night of space overhead, and civilization prepared to rip out its own intestines.

"Best we git up th' hill,' Whiley Johnson opined, taking young John Bodden by the arm and leading him up the beach, Grandpa LeGrand trailing after. "Git inside, git th' rock in place."

On the pier, Emil Bodden stared at the roiling water outside the reefs, pain as deep as the black oceans of the Greenland whaling grounds showing in his eyes. "I wonder will they 'member us a'tall, them young'uns?"

Behind him, Maassluis was crying softly. "Gone," he whimpered. "All gone."

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"Yes," Emil said. "For now." Then, not without a certain thoughtful calculation, he handed the ancient harpoon to his educated young friend and fellow lover of the sea. "Might need it, next time." He smiled and walked off the pier.

Maassluis stared at the old weapon, his hands instinctively finding the balancing point. How long *would* a nuclear winter last?

Experimentally, with a kind of love, he tossed the harpoon up, catching it overhand, in a throwing grip.

Coming Soon

October is F&SF's big 40th anniversary issue. One look at the table of contents will be enough to tell you that this is one issue that cannot be missed.

Brian W. Aldiss, NORTH OF THE ABYSS
J.G. Ballard, WAR FEVER
Algis Budrys, WHAT BEFELL MAIRIAM
Orson Scott Card, LOST BOYS
Thomas Disch, THE HAPPY TURNIP
Gregory Benford, MOZART ON MORPHINE
Barry N. Malzberg, O THOU LAST AND GREATEST
Frederik Pohl, THE ROCKY PYTHON CHRISTMAS VIDEO SHOW
Lucius Shepard, BOUND FOR GLORY
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Inside Science Fiction

BY CHARLES PLATT

DOWN AMONG THE DEAD

I'M LOOKING for the Laughing Dead. I'm on a street lined with decaying warehouses, in a derelict area just south of the Los Angeles business district. It's a Saturday, and the only sign of life is an old newspaper fluttering down the sidewalk on the dusty wind.

There's a truck parked on the corner — the kind of truck that generates electricity for movies on location. I follow fat black cables that snake along the broken sidewalk, and I reach a dented metal door. I can hear people inside. They're laughing, sure enough.

A gangling bearded weirdo, like a down-and-out rent-a-cop, opens the door and grudgingly lets me in, and I find myself in a sordid little waiting area that has all the charm of an abandoned bomb shelter. Snack-food remnants are scattered across a table, and there are some old steel folding chairs on the scuffed vinyl floor. A teenager in jeans, sneakers, white makeup, and a torn bedsheet daubed with blood is eating a Danish pastry. "Are you one of the Laughing Dead?" I ask him.

"Yep," he says.

Opposite him, on a ragged couch with collapsed springs, is a handsome young handicapped man cuddling an elderly dachsund. His name is Max DeMeritt, and he says he was in the movie *E.T.* Because he has no legs, he could fit inside the alien costume. "I played the drunk scene," he tells me. "Also, when E.T. was sneaking around while Mary put the groceries away."

Now he has a bit part in *The Laughing Dead* — a movie that is being made right here in this warehouse. He'll be a man in a wheelchair who has his legs torn off. Since Max has no legs to begin with, all they need to do is yank some fake legs away at the right moment.

"But what's this film about?" I ask. "What's the plot?"

"There is no plot. Ask anybody, and they'll tell you. It's just blood,

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and more blood."

The weirdo rent-a-cop is still giving me paranoid looks, and won't let me onto the set yet, so I go over to a guy who's slumped in another chair, holding a can of Coke. He has long blond hair, and he's wearing a full-face zombie mask with horrible protruding teeth. I take a flash photograph. He twitches, and I realize he was fast asleep.

I apologize for waking him up. "Who are you?" I ask.

"Arthur," he says. "Don't you recognize me?"

Why, yes, under the makeup, this is Arthur Byron Cover, author of science-fiction novels such as *Planetfall* and *Prodigy*, the latter being in the *Robot City* series.

"I am zombie number one," he tells me, "on the Mayan ball court of death. When you go inside, you will be privileged to see this incredible set. I have no lines of dialogue. I have to catch a basketball, or a severed human head. It metamorphoses from moment to moment."

"How much are you getting paid?" I ask.

He pauses thoughtfully. "Well, last night, they gave me a bagel. Today, as you can see, with this makeup on, I am unable to eat solid food."

So why's he participating? For glory, or out of sympathy for Somtow Sucharitkul, the creator of this low-budget epic?

"I just did this because I thought it would be neat," says Cover, a bit doubtfully. "But when you see Somtow's costume, you'll know that he's doing it purely for glory. He plays the evil Dr. Um-tzec. As one of the characters says, no *human* would have that name."

At this point, there's a break in shooting and I'm finally allowed in. Under the corrugated-iron roof of the old warehouse, there's a space slightly smaller than a basketball court enclosed by fake stone walls topped with skulls. Somtow Sucharitkul, who writes science fiction and horror under the name of S. P. Somtow, is sitting on a throne overlooking a sacrificial altar. He's wearing a garish head dress, a red-and-yellow beaded jacket, and a leopard-skin loincloth. A huge fan of peacock feathers is strapped to his back. He blinks at me genially through blue-framed glasses and raises his hand in greeting. I notice he has one ankle strapped in surgical tape.

"I twisted it when we were shooting in Arizona," he explains. "Not that it really matters. There's very little running around in this movie — not for the gods, at least. We just sit up here and preside."

I ask him what's happening here.

"This is the climax of the film, sort of. The five characters who

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have been trapped in a mysterious Mexican hotel have uncovered a path to this inner labyrinth, and Dr. Um-tzek has organized things so that if the priest sacrifices his bastard son, the harmonic convergence will be reversed, the Conquistadors will go back to Spain, and the Mayans will rule again." He shrugs. "It's a simple little revenge plot."

But what does this have to do with basketball?

"The Mayans actually played a game, sort of like basketball except that either the losers or the winners were sacrificed, depending on which anthropologist you listen to."

I dutifully admire the set. "Are those real skulls?"

"No, they're plastic skulls, two dollars apiece. Look, would you like a drink? If you go through there you'll find the room in which the possessed corazon rips out her heart, and in that room, there's a lot of food and drink set out."

I find my way through a fake-rock passageway and come to a trestle table laden with sliced bread, chopped fruit, and cold cuts. Tim Sullivan is standing there, wearing a priest's collar, with fake festering zits on his chin and a slightly mad gleam in his eye. He's another science-fiction writer — author of *Destiny's End*, and a new book, *The Parasite War*, due later this year. Meanwhile, he's playing the starring role in this movie. Did he have to take a screen test?

"God, no, nothing like that. I guess Somtow assumed I'd be able to do it, from the histrionics he'd seen me perform in everyday life. The last theatrical work I did was ten years ago."

How would he describe the film?

"A Mayan New-Age slasher version of Kramer vs. Kramer. I become possessed — an evil priest — but I survive at the end, still with the heart of the Mayan death god beating in my chest, so there's room for a sequel. *Laughing Dead Goes Blue Hawaii* or something like that."

Does he have a financial interest in the movie?

"I'm an associate producer, but I don't know it that really means much. I certainly didn't have to put up any of the money; I don't *have* any money. I may get a percentage, but it hasn't been completely arranged yet. I suppose I could hold them up to ransom at this point — you know, refuse to come out of my dressing room. But the dog left something in the dressing room last night, and it isn't a very appealing place to be right now."

At this point, Sullivan has to go back to the set and wield a sacrificial knife over the prostrate form of a small boy who screams, "No, dad, no!" while the evil Dr. Um-tzek

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looks on with a wicked grin. They're going to shoot this from three different angles, which will take half an hour, so I have ample time to wander around some more.

In a back room I find a lizard-monster model, with an oatmeal cookie that someone has wedged in his hideous gaping jaws. I also come across a rotted plastic face with one protruding eyeball, a naked female torso with an enormous gash in it (which can be opened and closed by concealed levers), and several big plastic bottles labelled in Magic Marker: "Mouth Blood," "Pumping Blood," "Blood (thick stuff)," and "Dried Blood Mix."

LATER, WHEN everyone takes a break, Sucharitkul explains how he started on the movie.

"I have a friend who had been trying to make a film for some time. He has lots of money, but not quite enough to make an ambitious film, so I convinced him that if he did a low-budget horror film, this would give him credibility, and he could go on from there. He agreed on one condition: all of his life, he'd wanted to see a film set in the day-of-the-dead festival in Oaxaca. So I tried to write something incorporating this, and eventually I put together a horror film with a lot of things that are very fashionable now a days — like crystals, channeling, and Mayans.

"The serious aspect of the film is that it's about people's ability to overcome their own dark sides. On top of this there's the Kramer-vs.-Kramer theme — a father trying to get to know his estranged child, except that the child is the offspring of a guilt-ridden union between a priest and a nun." He grins. "The union actually takes place in a confessional. We also have some wonderfully disgusting scenes — a pumping heart ripped out of a woman's chest, and a severed arm stuffed down someone's throat. You can see the fingers, still *writhing*, inside the flesh." He laughs happily.

Sucharitkul's fiction has often mixed humor and horror. I ask why.

"I take horror seriously, and it frightens me greatly. But the mechanics of it are very similar to the mechanics of comedy. You could, for instance, have someone slipping on a banana peel — and banging his head on the pavement and dying in agony. It's the same dynamic: shocking the audience with something that is unexpected." He pauses. "Also, if we didn't find horrifying things funny, they might be too depressing."

He's the author of seventeen novels, including *Mallworld* and *Vampire Junction*, plus several scripts for animated TV shows. Though he now lives in greater Los

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Angeles, he was born in Thailand. "King Rama the Sixth was married to two of my great aunts, who were also his nieces. And one of my grandfather's sisters was the queen. It was all very incestuous."

Sucharitkul was a musician before he became a writer. In addition to directing, co-producing, scripting, and acting in *The Laughing Dead*, he'll be composing and playing the score. Making the movie seems to have exhausted him, and he has a disoriented, distracted look. Was it even worse than he expected?

"Some aspects, yes. We're about 100 percent over budget, at this point. But it's been fun — in a hideous sort of way."

The production has spent almost a million dollars, largely on sets and special effects (the latter by John Buechler, who did effects for *The Reanimator*). The actors are mostly amateurs: beside Sullivan and Cover, authors William F. Wu and Greg Cox play small roles, there's a crowd scene in Tucson composed primarily of science-fiction fans, and short-story writer Ed Bryant plays a redneck whose head is run over by a bus. In addition, Sucharitkul's sister, the chairman of a multinational corporation controlling about five percent of the garment industry in Thailand, plays the part of a homeless teenage runaway.

Sucharitkul is optimistic about the movie's future, and is hoping for theatrical distribution. "I think this is the kind of film that the French like," he says, deadpan. "So we're going to start off at Cannes, see what they say, and go from there."

Meanwhile, he's already planning his next epic.

"After making money with a horror film, one wants critical acclaim," he says. "To achieve that, it seems one must make a quirky coming-of-age film, like *My Life as a Dog* or *Stand By Me*. So that's my next project."

And after that?

"After that," he says, with regal boredom appropriate to a descendant of Thai royalty, "I shall make anything I want."

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Marc Laidlaw's novel NEON LOTUS was a finalist for the Philip K. Dick award; his last story here was "The Demonstration" (February 1989). His new story concerns some very odd street people; he describes it as a slice-of-life from San Francisco's Tenderloin . . .

Uneasy Street

By Marc Laidlaw

"AH, GOOD, HERE come the cops to arrest some more mutants," said Raleigh's boss, Pete. "Can't have them just lounging around, living off the fat of the land, snacking on the core of our civilization."

Raleigh finished counting verdigrised pennies into the grimy hand of a man who wore a heavy overcoat and woollen muffler despite the August heat, then he handed over the brown bag full of Copenhagen slicks. His eyes followed the man out into the heat-warped glare of the street. In the flickering intervals between speeding cars, he could see that the tiny park across the street was full of cops.

"Mutants?" Raleigh said, glancing into the fish-eye mirror at the men who browsed between racks of cello-wrapped magazines and sex toys. "You mean, like, genetic drift?"

"I'm talking sci-fi horror movies, kid. I mean bug-eyed monsters with green skin and the faces of dogs. Nothing remotely human."

Raleigh looked back at the park. "They're just bums, Pete. Street people."

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"I must disagree," Pete said, taking a moment to readjust his John Lennon spectacles, which looked as misplaced as a lorgnette on his oft-broken nose. "Neither hapless hustler nor decrepit wino, Raleigh. These are the genuine item. *Homo mutatis*. I've been studying them for years, from this inconspicuous vantage. And what's more, I'd wager the police will find their ragged pockets stuffed full of Easy."

"Easy? That new drug, you mean?"

Pete stood up excitedly, peering past Raleigh and wagging his finger in the direction of the cash register. Raleigh turned to face yet another overdressed customer bearing yet another glossy, overpriced skinzine. As he searched for the dollar value among kroner, pounds, and lire, Pete went on about mutant pharmaceuticals.

"It's everywhere these days, Raleigh. It's as common as the mutants themselves. Don't know where they get it, but they're all pushers, selling it to each other. They call it 'Easy,' I gather, because it's so easy to fix. A snort, a swallow — no needles need apply. And because once you take enough of it, life seems easy. Easy as pie. Maybe it caused the mutants; I don't know. You can blame them on solar flares, or pesticides, or the national debt. From my experience, poverty can warp the mind; why shouldn't it have subtler genetic effects?"

"Thank you, sir," Raleigh told his customer. "You might want to keep on this side of the street for a few blocks."

"Won't matter," Pete proclaimed. "The police have their hands full at the moment. Hey, Raleigh, take a look at this one. I'll watch the register."

Raleigh switched places with Pete in the cramped space behind the counter, and by stepping on the hidden cashbox, he managed to get a clear view of the melee.

"All I see is a bunch of cops," he said.

"Brown coat, brown hair — it looks like a victim of cosmetic malpractice. And it hops like a frog."

"Jesus, Pete," he said. "That's a person, not an 'it.'"

"And I say you're wrong, kid. That comes to $9.95."

"You have no compassion, Pete."

Raleigh watched the woman stumble against the metal steps of the paddy van. With both hands cuffed behind her back, and the cops pushing her ahead of them, she stumbled forward like a sack of potatoes. A plastic bag full of gray powder fell from the folds of her coat; one cop snatched

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it up with a shout. Raleigh had a glimpse of her face: wide, loose lips; bassett-hound eyes showing more red than white; skin a cigarettish brown-green in color. As the cops shoved her into the van, he realized why the woman had "hopped," as Pete put it. One leg of her slacks flapped loose.

"My God, that poor lady. She's an amputee, and the way the cops are shoving her around—"

"Let me see," Pete said, striving to regain his old place. Raleigh held on long enough to see her remaining leg disappear into the van, then the door slammed shut.

"Well, that's that," said Pete. "But they'll be back tomorrow, and twice as many, too. Confine them in a cell and they multiply even faster."

"You're sick," Raleigh said. His face burned; his throat had closed up and gone dry. "Those are just regular people, like maybe you and I could have been if we'd had a long run of bad luck. It's living on the street makes them sick like that."

"The street, eh? You sure it's not the greenhouse effect?"

Raleigh sputtered and laughed despite himself. Pete slapped him on the shoulder, then leaned in close, whispering, "So what makes them look like this?"

He referred to the next customer, a stunted, pop-eyed old man with a fringe of gray beard and a toothless mouth. Raleigh gritted his teeth and counted the proffered money, all in tarnished dimes, though he felt as if he were selling *Wet Beaver Beach Party* to Snuffy Smith.

"Sorry, gramps," he said a minute later. "There's not enough here. Why don't you go get yourself something to eat?"

"You crazy?" the old man rasped. "That shit's expensive!"

The next morning, before Pete's shop opened, Raleigh stood in the park across the street with a lukewarm cup of coffee and a doughnut. Brick high-rises enclosed the little square of balding grass and litter; an alley ran along one edge. Thorny hedges concealed a few long, lumpy shapes like lint-colored turds the size of men; the sound of snoring drifted from them. Otherwise the park was empty.

As he drank his coffee, he saw Pete wandering up the far side of the street, beret pulled down low on his brow. Raleigh drained the Styrofoam cup and tossed it toward the trash can, but a gust of stale wind swept it aside.

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The park was full of garbage. One cup more or less made no difference. Yet Raleigh could not avoid the voice of his conscience. Littering was bad, punishable by heavy fines. He wandered over to the hedge and carefully spread a few branches, looking for his cup.

There it lay, swaddled in bloody bandages, steaming.

He staggered back, slashing his wrists on thorns.

"Raleigh! Ho!"

Pete hailed him from the door of the shop. Raleigh hesitated, drawn to take another peek into the bushes despite the sickness caused by his first look. He finally broke and ran across the street ahead of a wave of traffic, the glimpse of dirty, blood-soaked swathes still hanging in his eyes.

"I'm glad you came early today," Pete said as they went in. The shop was dark, and he kept it that way as he went back into his office for the cashbox. "I wanted a chance to talk to you privately."

Raleigh was wondering about the heap of bandages. He tried to make himself concentrate on what Pete was saying, but it wasn't easy. He was accustomed to tuning out most of his boss's words.

"I'm afraid I have to let you go. Business has been lousy lately, as you may have been aware. I'm going to have to run the place single-handedly for a while if I want to break even." He shook his head and laughed. "Even then, it's not likely."

"Wait a minute," Raleigh said, following him at last. "Let me go? You mean, just like that — cut me off?"

"Like I said —"

"Come on, you can't even give me a few hours a week? Pete, this job is my security! I'm counting on it."

"I told you, I'm deep in the red. I wish I could give you some kind of severance pay, but this isn't exactly a corporation. Of course, you'll get the usual discount if you want to buy anything."

"Yeah, right," Raleigh said, slapping at a stack of magazines that stood as tall as Pete. They toppled and slithered over the floor of the office.

"There's no call for that," Pete said.

"You could've at least warned me, man."

Raleigh raised his hands to go after another stack.

Pete stepped in front of him. "All right, here's your warning. If you don't get out of here, I'm calling the cops. I don't need a vandal in my shop."

Raleigh spun away from him and pushed out of the tiny office, rushed

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down the aisles of packaged flesh. Behind him, Pete muttered about Vandals, Goths, barbarians, mutants, the beginning of the end.

It felt good to slam the door and shove past the first trench-coated customer of the day.

An hour later he was still stalking the street, pissed off, in another world, and not a cent richer. In fact, he was already five dollars closer to eviction from his Tenderloin studio.

He curbed his anger and bought a pork *bao* from a Dim Sum place; the red meat was rancid, so he hurled it into traffic and went back demanding another. The cook came out from behind the counter with a carving knife, while two screaming Chinese women tried to hold him pinned against the wall — what was known in the area as Hong Kong persuasion. He tore free, but their shouts followed him down the street.

Get yourself together, man, he told himself, examining the holes the claws of the women had left in the shoulders of his T-shirt. Make yourself presentable, because you need a job in a hurry.

He headed toward Market Street along peep-show row, ducking into every adult bookstore that he passed. In most of them the scene was so depressing that he didn't bother offering his services. Men were browsing but not buying. He knew a few of Pete's competitors, but all of them told him straight out that business was sick. Flesh was a luxury item these days.

By the time five o'clock rolled around, he was no closer to finding a job, and he was forty dollars short on the rent. He knew that he'd be up all night retracing his steps, looking for night-shift positions, but he had the feeling that things would be just as tight.

Standing at the window of his one-room apartment, he watched the neon come to life below him. Bums moved like pigeons in the street, picking through trash bins. Three generations of a Vietnamese family poked through bushes for aluminum cans, bottle glass, anything they could recycle. The grandmother picked up a wad of soiled rags and dropped it with a start.

What you need (he told himself) is to get out of the slums, move into the suburbs or the financial district. Get yourself a haircut, a change of clothes, a telephone number of your own. Make yourself some money.

"Yeah, right. Just like that."

He examined himself in the mirror. Uncut hair, three-day beard, gray T-shirt slowly fading to black.

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"I need money to make money," he reminded himself. "And where's that gonna come from?"

In the mirror he surveyed the inverted room. It looked bigger in there, full of promise. He considered the black guitar case, the ghetto-blaster that needed new batteries, the cheap stereo.

"Time is money, and time's a-wasting."

He opened the closet, hauled out an old cardboard suitcase, and started to pack his things.

"Hey, kid, wanna buy joints? Crack? It's good stuff, no shit. Acid? I got everything. Hey, you want Easy? Special today — Easy comes cheap, kid. Tell you what, I'll let you try it free of charge. If you don't like it, let me know. I got plenty of other stuff, something for everybody."

Raleigh kept walking, but the man hung close to him, following him up Sixth Street. He must have seen him go into the pawnshop with the grocery cart full of goods; and now his hands were empty.

"I don't have money to waste on drugs," he said.

"First time's free, baby. You look like an Easy kind of guy. And Easy is something I got plenty of."

"Nothing personal," Raleigh said, "but fuck off."

"Yeah, Jack. You know where to find me."

Raleigh had checked out of his studio that morning and moved his stuff into the Civic Center Hotel. It was half the price of his old place, but crowded, cramped, and noisy — like a prison, a dormitory, or a motel. The window in his coffin-sized room had a view of a littered rooftop, fifty other windows, and a tattered, illegible billboard. He had enough money in his pocket to pay for a month's rent, if he did all his eating at Jack-in-the-Box. He wouldn't be buying any new clothes, though.

He cut down an alley. He didn't know this part of the city all that well; maybe he should look for work around here. Hell, he had skills, didn't he? He didn't have to work in the same old skinshops all his life, right? He could stack boxes, do lifting, deliver papers —

He looked up suddenly, confronted by half a dozen silent figures huddled near a chain-link fence. They were as surprised as he was. One of them dropped a gray plastic bag, creating an explosion of dust like mushroom spores. He started to take a wide detour around them, avoiding meeting their eyes, and they moved back to clear the way even further.

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As if invoked by his howl, a shape rose from the shadows near the door.

There was something familiar about the way a few of them moved.

They hopped.

As he stiffened, craning to look back at them, shouts came from the far end of the alley. A cluster of teenagers stood there, yelling at him.

No, they were yelling at the mendicants. Raleigh heard the bums scuffling away behind him, kicking tin cans and broken glass as they fled, maimed and ungainly. The boys came running toward him. He expected them to ignore him as they went after their unhealthy targets, and a detached bit of Darwinian reasoning flashed through his brain like a sound track lifted from a science program: "Stronger and more cohesive social groups now purge the streets of the sick and dying fragments." You're slow, you blow.

They started flinging rocks and hunks of masonry; switchblades scratched the air.

My God, he thought. They're the ones cutting up the street people.

Raleigh ducked and dashed to one side, desperate for cover, but two of them veered in his direction and knocked him down. They bashed him into the wall, kicked him in the ribs. He felt their hands dig into his pockets after the wallet, and when he screamed at them to stop, screamed for the police, he saw a fist come down clenching a slab of brick that looked like a petrified heart. He didn't feel it hit.

The pain, when it came, hit him like a strong dose of acid. He didn't know where he was: he just lay there and let himself ache. It felt like there was grit in his wounds. Maybe a few ribs were broken. He opened his eyes and saw the dark alley, lined with cars now. He thought of the people who had parked next to him, and wondered what they'd thought of him — if they'd noticed him at all. Only another wino sleeping in the gutter. Just another junkie.

He tried to move, but the pain made him moan. He sank back down.

As if invoked by his howl, a shape rose from shadows near the door. It was a man, rising from a heap of black plastic garbage bags. No, the man was clothed in plastic bags, the better to conceal himself in these dark

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alleys. Raleigh wondered if the trashmen ever tried to collect him.

"You're hurtin', kid. Take some of this."

The man held out a bag. In the light from a distant streetlamp, it looked like it was full of mold.

"No, thanks," Raleigh said.

"It's pure," said the man. "I've got a reputation to protect. I wouldn't mess your head with no inferior item."

"No, thanks," Raleigh said again.

"I'm the Man from Glad. I find it fresh! Come on, dude, I know you need it. Just take a little on your palm and lick it up. It's got no taste. You'll feel a world better."

Raleigh tried to move, but his ribs felt like a rack of knives stabbing him all at once. He sank back with tears in his eyes, recognizing that the moans he heard were his own.

"I can't stand here and do nothing," said the Man from Glad.

Before Raleigh could protect himself, a handful of dust was shoved under his nose. Some of it went in his mouth; some of it he inhaled; the rest he flung back at the Man from Glad, who laughed and pretended to bathe in it. The dust drifted down like a slow fall of pollen.

"Easy, man, Easy! It's all so Easy now. . . ."

Raleigh didn't feel any happier, but he sure didn't feel so bad. He rose slowly, because he knew that he should be careful; but he was numb, completely numb. Someone else was in control of his body, a pilot he could trust. Maybe this mysterious pilot would guide him to an emergency room, or maybe not. Whatever happened, he was sure it would be all right.

"Better, isn't it?" asked the Man from Glad.

"Better," Raleigh agreed through thick lips.

"Now go get yourself cleaned up; look after yourself. I don't want to see you around here. You're too young for this kind of shit."

The Man from Glad appeared to be a shiny, kindly ghost, a crinkling silhouette dancing in the alley. Raleigh smiled and nodded and glided forward. Everything was Easy now, and Easy was everything.

"Where do you get this stuff?" he asked.

"Oh baby!" said the Man from Glad, jigging away from him. "It just falls from Heaven."

* * *

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"It'll come from somewhere,' he told himself. "Money's like Easy; yeah, it'll come from somewhere. From Heaven. Don't worry, Raleigh. You'll have a room again real soon. You'll have some clothes and some things of your own. . . . But for now, you've got to travel light, right?"

As he zipped up his knapsack, he heard muttering outside in the dark. He took a last look out the window of the hotel. Down in the dark corner of the rooftop, there was a huddle of shapes. It was nearly midnight. When had they climbed up there?

A black shadow pulled away from the group and went crawling toward the dim-lit, featureless billboard. He heard wild laughter, then whispers. Someone darted after the fugitive, but they were too slow, too clumsy.

The person in flight made it onto the lower edge of the billboard and hauled himself out onto the narrow catwalk where the sign painters worked. It was his laughter Raleigh heard. He scrabbled along the gray face of the board, a disjointed silhouette. For a moment he passed through the one beam of light that still shone on the blank sign, then he crept beyond.

High on Easy, Raleigh thought.

The others kept to the shadows, giving up pursuit.

At the far edge of the billboard, the man simply disappeared. It was a three-story drop. He couldn't have gone anywhere else.

Raleigh backed away from the window, watching not the shadows, not the far edge of the catwalk, but that diffuse white region where the single bulb lit the billboard.

There was a broad red streak across it, as if the man had slapped the sign with a fat, wet paintbrush as he struggled past.

"Oh God," Raleigh said. "I'm out of here."

The doctor at St. Anthony's took his temperature, changed the bandages around his ribs, and gave him the usual packet of aspirin. "Get some rest," was his only advice.

"Yeah, right," Raleigh said. "You got a spare bed here?"

"I'm sorry, we're full," the doctor said. "We have permanent tenants now. Used to be on a first-come basis, but that's all changed."

"How about the soup kitchen?"

The doctor shook his head. "We don't do that anymore."

Raleigh rubbed his belly. "Just like that?"

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"I'm sorry."

No wonder the people in the street looked so much sicker this year. If they hadn't been so thin and weak, their desperation might have made them dangerous. As it was, they stirred few emotions but pity.

He passed the Public Library, once a daytime haven for vagrants. Now you weren't permitted to browse or read there unless you showed a library card. And to get a library card, you needed an address. Raleigh had never used the library when he had a place to live. Pete's shop had provided all the reading material he needed.

As he stumbled up Larkin, he became aware of the well-dressed men and women hurrying to and from the Federal Building, City Hall, and the Opera Plaza. They moved to avoid him, kept their eyes fixed on the sky, as if enjoying the thin, angular allotment of blue with all their hearts. What Raleigh saw was a chicken bone with every last bit of gristle gnawed from the knobs; a coffee cup swimming with thin liquid and cigarette butts, too disgusting to consider; a crumpled paper bag that he would have searched for remnants, if he hadn't seen another bum toss it down ahead of him. The trash bin had been scattered over the sidewalk by lunchtime foragers.

There was no end to hunger. It was his constant companion. He thought back with nostalgic regret to the rancid pork *bao* he had thrown to the cars. Panhandling, he was lucky to raise fifty cents a day, which was less than half what he would have needed for one of the sticky things. He wasn't yet sickly or ugly enough to summon instant pity from strangers, despite the bandages that he wore for show, now that his injuries had healed.

He saw a young man coming, mirrored glasses, preppy haircut, sport coat and valise. Pretending not to see him, Raleigh thought, He's my age.

"Got a quarter, mister?"

The guy did a little sidestep. "I wouldn't give you the sweat off my ass."

If only he could have been slightly more pathetic. It would have made life much simpler.

The only simple thing about his existence was Easy.

It was always there if he wanted it, whether he needed it or not. Little gray bags from Heaven.

He was afraid of it, though. He took it sparingly when it was offered, and never asked for a second hit. He was afraid it would make him completely indifferent to the street. You could buy it if you wanted to, if you

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were, say, a hip young dude from the Sunset looking for kicks; but to someone on the street, it was free. He couldn't find out where it came from. Heaven seemed like the logical source. It did give some comfort to those without food or shelter. But he wasn't yet ready to accept a numbness that profound, an obliteration so complete.

"Taking the Easy way out," was what they called it, when he overheard them talking. Most of the street people avoided him, sensing that he had not accepted them as companions. He wasn't ready to give up — not yet. He still looked up at the windows in the tall buildings, imagined the warm rooms behind them, and planned ways of returning. He just needed to get back on his feet; and to do that, he needed to get a little stronger; and to do that, God damn it, he needed to eat.

He stood in the park across the street from Pete's shop, and stared at the window half the day, thinking of ways to get in and escape with the cashbox.

Darkness came down. The crowd in the park ebbed and flowed. Matches flared; cigarettes were shared; gray powder poured and was wasted on the wind.

He listened to their talk, but kept to himself, watching Pete lock up and skulk down the avenue through the cold wind and fog, sunk down in his high collar, beret sliding gutterward.

"Fresh batch of Easy," someone was saying.

"Yeah, where'd this one come from?"

"Shit, man, a box of the stuff sitting in an alley, same as usual. Plenty for everybody. Man from Glad found it first — he's got a nose for the stuff. You know what I think? I think there's some fat dude sitting up in one of those towers, mixing it up with government money —"

"That's where my VA loan went, man!"

"— and handing it out free to all us sick fucks, so that we'll be happy to stay where we are, and never climb up so high that we can spoil his day. Some kid, prob'ly. Spoiled brat. The higher he gets, the less he has to look at us."

Raleigh thought of the guy in the dark glasses, skittering past him.

"Yeah? I'd like to get to that guy's penthouse."

"You? They wouldn't let you in the fucking freight elevator. You better forget it and be grateful he thinks enough of you to give you free Easy."

"Aw, man, stop talking about it and spoon it out."

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Knives in Raleigh's gut prodded him to his feet. He grabbed onto a lamppost and wondered how long he would have to wait before things settled down enough to let him take a shot at the window. He could smash that glass door, run back into the office, grab the cashbox, and be out of there in thirty seconds.

But it would be the last thing he ever did of his own free will.

He could see all too clearly how such a move would screw him up completely and forever. The cops would catch him with the hamburger halfway in his mouth, then he could forget about ever getting back on his feet.

Raleigh clenched his stomach and huddled over, gritting his teeth. He could almost feel the rock in his hand, the one he would use to smash the glass. He could more readily imagine the cold manacles the cops would clap on his wrists.

I'll never do it, he thought. I'll starve first.

After a while he realized that there was a hand on his shoulder. When he felt it there, and knew it for what it was — the hand of an unknown friend, a sympathetic stranger — he started to sob.

A raspy voice said, "What's the matter, hon?"

Was that a woman's voice?

He looked up into a face he had seen once before. A face with wide, loose lips; sagging, black-circled eyes; a face with skin the color of Easy.

"I know what your problem is," she said. "Come on, can you get up? Why don't you come with me?"

She took him by the arm and pulled him up. He should have been the one helping her to rise, because she had only one leg.

"You're a new one," she said. "But I've seen you somewhere before, haven't I?"

He clung to the lamppost.

"You want some Easy?" she asked.

He couldn't speak; he shook his head.

"You want company?"

"Why don't you leave me alone?" he shouted. "I'm not like you! Not like any of you, you understand? I'm not gonna get stuck here, numbed out of my skull, helpless and paralyzed. . . ."

"Right on, brother," someone said. "But how do you plan to get out?"

He realized that many of the faces in the park were staring at him.

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Conversations had broken off; cigarette tips hung unmoving in the dark.

"I'll do it," he said.

"On your own?" asked the one-legged woman.

He drew away from her and spat the worst thing he could think of: "Fucking mutants."

"That ain't true," she said, some vague hurt in her eyes. "We're people. We take care of our own. And we'll help you —"

"I'm not one of your own," he said, "and I never will be."

"That's fine, hon. But how are you gonna make it through the night?"

He glanced down at her leg and felt the pain of her loss. It was all mixed up with his own regret.

"I'm sorry," he said, breaking down now. "Christ, I'm sorry. I can't handle this. I'm the mutant. I'm the one who can't adjust. Stupid of me. . . ."

He swung around the lamppost, staggering as if he were drunk — although he was merely weak — and strode toward the far, dark side of the park. He crossed the alley and went into the deepest shadows, where he was sure they couldn't see him. And there he stopped. For all his denial, he was afraid to leave them. He was not one of them, but he was close enough.

He sank down, trying to ignore the burning hollow in his stomach, fending off the sparks that threatened to consume his vision. He felt himself deteriorating, breaking down into more isolated, desperate pieces. He tore at his fingernails. He forgot where he was.

Later — much later, it must have been — the sound of crying woke him. It was darker than before; the corner markets were shut down; the streets were deserted. He listened to the weeping for nearly a minute, then discovered that it came from himself.

Others had heard the sound. Shadows moved around him, blocking out the few streetlights that hadn't been shattered or burned out. Shapes closed in, moving awkwardly, some of them hopping.

Terror took hold of him. He had called them *mutants*, insulted them, told them how he despised them. He thought of bloody bandages in the hedge.

My God, he thought. They're going to show me. They're going to *make* me one of them.

He backed up against the wall. One of the shadows put its hand over his mouth before he could scream. Two of them dragged him down the alley, to where it was even darker.

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He struggled, but they knew just how to hold him.

Someone lit a match, back in the recess of the alleyway, and what he saw in that instant surpassed his ability to respond. He did not even try to scream. The asphalt was stained with blood; wads of clotted brown cloth were piled in the corners, stuffed down storm gratings; someone was holding a knife under a stream of alcohol. Bands of surgical rubber lay coiled like worms on the stains. The match went out, but they lit another, touched it to the knife. The blade glowed blue as neon, shining in the eyes of those around him.

"We know what you need," said the rasping voice of the one-legged woman. "We've all felt the same thing. We understand."

"No," he mumbled, under the fleshy palm. "Please don't do it."

"Sometimes to get what you want, you gotta give something up. You make a sacrifice, and in return. . . ."

"Please don't."

The blade flickered and went out, but not before someone touched it to a candle. The tiny flame gradually grew, filling the cul-de-sac with a thin radiance. A skinny, aging man sat in the farthest corner, staring up at them. Raleigh had never seen him before. The knife was in his hands.

"Please," Raleigh pleaded. "Why don't you let me go? I'll find the people who crushed you, the people who hooked you on Easy, the fucking overlords. I'll make it somehow; I won't forget you, I swear. I just need — I just need —"

"You need us," said the woman.

The man with the knife said, "Easy."

Someone took out a crackling gray plastic bag.

"You need strength."

"Easy!"

Raleigh didn't try to move. He knew they wouldn't let him. But he shook his head, and used his most reasonable tone of voice.

"I don't want it," he said. "I don't need it."

"Don't worry," said the woman with the raspy voice. "It isn't for you."

The man set the knife in his lap, opened the bag under his nose, and inhaled deeply. He sniffed again and again, then began to lick the insides of the bag until every grain of the stuff had been consumed. He slumped back against the wall, grinning, his eyes rolling up into his head.

Another man dropped down next to him and took the knife. He

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slit the seam of the ragged trousers and ripped away the cloth.

Raleigh put his hand to his mouth. With a length of surgical tubing, they began to tie off the man's leg, just above the knee.

He gagged, turned away. They held him more gently now.

"There, there. Do you see? There's no need to be afraid. Do you want some Easy?"

He gasped for air, shaking his head, but someone shoved a bag against his face, and he couldn't help breathing it.

"Every now and then, someone comes along, someone young like you, someone with promise," said the woman. "We don't mind making the sacrifice. Our strength will become your strength. But everything we give to you, you'll eventually pay back."

He felt numbness, acceptance, a sense of purpose. He would never forget these people. He would do everything in his power to help them. Yes, he would make it out of here. He would find the monsters, the mutants, who drove these human beings down into the cracks of the earth, and he would destroy them. The strength to do all this was about to come into him.

"It's not so bad is it?" said the woman. "The Easy, I mean? We won't give you much. Wouldn't want to get you hooked. But believe me, it'll help you keep down your supper."

The report on Competition 48 was squeezed out of this issue and will appear next month.

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The ever surprising Mr. Wightman offers a piece of pure science fiction. The theme is a basic one of SF, but in the author's sure hands, it seems fresh as a Spring breeze.

Somewhere Dreamers Wake

By Wayne Wightman

O.K., SO WHAT we need is some secret knowledge."

"Like supernatural stuff, because if it's *natural*, then, you know, it can be dealt with logically, and then it could maybe be disproved at some later time. It would lose all credibility as a religion."

"Right. We've seen that happen before. So it's gotta be some booga-booga stuff like, 'The secret of the universe is yours if you're willing to do this prescripted weird stuff.'"

"Yeah, right. And that ties into rituals."

"'If you perform these ginkoid routines, no matter how stupid or irrational they may seem to be, you'll get all the sex and money you could want.'"

"Be serious. We have a timetable here."

"Right. I was kidding. 'Follow these precepts, and you'll get a lot of great stuff that we won't describe in too much detail until *after you die.*'"

"Yeah, something like that that can't be checked out."

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"We have to be highly serious about this. You recall, we've had experience before with people not taking our constructs seriously because we were too considerate. I mean, basically, what we've learned is that unless it's something with a lot of vicious cruelty attached, no one's going to listen. You know, like, 'Believe unto me —'"

"Yeah, we have to have a lot of that idiotic cryptic syntax crap."

"Right, it goes with the secret-knowledge business. Only a few people will be able to understand what we're saying, and that'll help stratify the society."

"'Believe unto me, or as surely as the night followeth the chicken on the hill, we'll rip your mucus-filled lungs out of your chest with ice picks and feed them to your children.'"

"Yeah, stuff like that. Makes sense to me. I think the ice pick part is too direct, but the idea is solid. I respect threats of violence. Don't you?"

"I do, yes."

"Me too."

"The point of the nub exactly. So we've settled that. But in order to make these plugholes respect threats of violence, we need to ram it down on a few of them as examples. You know, vengeance from the sky. With proper warning, of course. 'Do this or else' kind of stuff."

"Mean stuff, you mean. Cruelty. You're talking —"

"I'm talking stuff like even the walking incompetent can grasp. Basic animal training. 'Turn right when you see the light — or we wire you up and throw the switch.'"

"I see."

"I'm talking cannibalism, blood-drinking, and the righteous slaughter of women and children."

"Serious business."

"The idea here, remember, is to keep these people from moving too fast, and to get them to keep in mind their baser natures. After all — this is The Big Time, right?"

"The biggest time."

"No argument there."

"Then, ladies and gentlemen, let's put it to 'em."

The carriers came in on schedule, bearing their cargo of sleepers. Vast and complex, dark and rectangular, they drifted in from worlds that had

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a geosynchronous orbit, configuring in the shape of an immense ninety-petaled flower.

Inside the dark hulls, their crews monitored the machines, made minuscule adjustments, and casually scanned the empty planet below, allowing the computers time to calculate the locations of future cities, the directions of highways, placement of neighborhood streets, street signs, the trees and which should have scars or initials carved in them, where the houses should be, the kinds of glass and brick and wood the houses would be built from, the furniture in each house, and the million perfections and imperfections that would go into every dwelling.

Elsewhere in the great ships, to maintain the human touch, committees made the major decisions concerning the basic parameters of life on this world.

"O.K., the next question on the agenda is the question of race. One homogeneous race, several races, many races, race and subrace, or what."

"I always thought it'd be nice to have a subrace. They could do chores. I move we go for race and subrace."

"Built-in slaves, in other words. Remember who these people are. You want to give them that kind of convenience?"

"Wait a second. People have slaves all the time without a subrace. You just enslave some group."

"A subrace is different, though. They're *made* for chores."

"Too cut-and-dried. I think we should have equal races and let them hack it out on their own. Eight to ten equal races."

"*Eight to ten!* Are you kidding? We want some of these people to survive, you know? The idea isn't to reduce the population by 90 percent in the first year — we just want a constant regular thinning to be an ongoing process. I mean, our pod people here weren't the best of citizens, but wholesale slaughter isn't what anyone had in mind."

"I agree."

"Well, I just thought we should try something new."

"I move we go for equal races."

"Show of hands? . . . O.K. Equal races it is. And can we agree later on how many we want to divide them up into? Fine. Now, how do we want to distinguish the races?"

"Weird appendages."

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"First you want a subrace, then you want weird appendages. Maybe you'd be happier over BioStructures. Anyway, I don't think we have time for genetic manipulation extensive enough to give us weird appendages. We go to insertion in twenty hours."

"Color, then. Make 'em different colors. Something easy to spot, anyway. We can do color in twenty hours, can't we?"

Sure, color's easy. O.K., what colors? Let me see here.... O.K., here's the color chart. Can we have a show of hands on these, and we'll pick the top six and then decide how many races we want to go for. How many for ruddy gray?"

FROM THE bellies of the ships, a spray of missles blossomed and spread around the planet, precisely oriented themselves, and blazed through the atmosphere. The lands and seas were seeded with complex strings of specifically tailored genetic information, and from this, in the ocean, fish began to grow. Undersea grasses and forests of swaying, flap-leafed plants sprouted up in hours. Thousands of species of fish, crustaceans, mollusks, and sea mammals evolved overnight; while on the continents, insects, arachnids, birds, reptiles, mammals, and all the rest formed out of lumps of earth, and with the passage of hours became almost alive.

Underground, layers of apparently fossilized bones and plants formed in the soil.

With every ecological niche accounted for by the silent minds in the hovering ships, an explosion of animals spread across the land, yet these animals seemed to sleep. They lay on the ground or drifted in the seas or sat in their nests, only embryonically conscious.

In places where cities were planned, the earth whispered and sighed, and from the dirt there sprang up the vague shapes of houses and cars and skyscrapers. With every minute that passed, the details became sharper and more precise.

Inside the houses, carpets and furniture jellied and solidified. On a table a fibrous lump turned slowly into a crystal bowl, and in it, several apples, a string of grapes, and two darkening bananas separated from each other and deepened in color.

Under furniture the surface of the floors shed a thin layer of dust,

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wisps of old spiderwebs, and a flat blob became a lost coin with a specific date on it. At the back of the house, the air conditioner grunted and came to life.

"All right. As for their history, we're up to our final decision. Prewar or postwar, automatically, 20 million to 50 million of our sleepers are going to be aced in the next few years, and immediate wholesale slaughter, while not an entirely bad idea, has raised some legal and economic questions back home, i.e., why go to all the expense of bringing them here if we just set up a situation where a substantial percentage dies. If we go postwar, we're missing out on a lot of easy-access natural selection, but we avoid the legal issue. Show of hands — who's for prewar?"

"Before we vote on this —"

"Look, it's time for the goddamned vote! It's a little late for reconsiderations, don't you think? We have to wrap this up in ten minutes, in case you've lost track."

"I just had a thought about how we could have it both ways. Cut our high-overhead war losses, but keep in the selection factors."

"You've got thirty seconds."

"We go postwar and build in a few potentialities for subsequent localized conflicts."

"I like that."

"So do I."

"But someone would have to define the potentialities for the brains."

"It's a standing program and can be input in a few minutes. I already checked."

"Do you have the codes?"

"I can get them to you in a couple of minutes."

"I like that idea."

"Show of hands: Postwar with potential conflict development.... Very good. People, our committee is adjourned."

Inside the ships the crews monitored the final adjustments on the individual pods. Each pod, a thin, shell-like capsule, held one protoperson who had been extracted from some other world, in some other time.

Some of them had been extracted for high crimes, such as threatening to divert the course of their world's history into some direction considered

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dangerous by those who made such decisions. Others were taken for being unpredictably erratic in their actions, for fear that they might stumble on something that could alter the slowly evolving status quo. To balance these out, some had been extracted who had merely been lost in their own times, unsure of who they were of where they were, and their sudden absence had been noticed by no one. And some were taken merely to fill the extraction quota.

But the pods were full, and as determinations came from the various committees, the subtle balance of genetic information in the protopeople was changed to mirror their agreements.

For six days, Camien Nhao had been sitting with his scanner, seeing that it operated properly. It was programmed occasionally to signal that it was malfunctioning, but this was only to keep Camien attentive. The machines on the ship never broke down, or if they did, they repaired themselves without anyone being aware of it.

Camien's scanner kept watch over 375,000 of the several million pods resting in the bowels of the carrier. If one of the protopeople began developing badly or simply started to rot in its casing, the scanner told him that remedies were being applied. If the condition was terminal, the embryonic personality was simply extracted and put in one of the blanks that were brought along for this purpose.

In the meantime, Camien slept a lot, gazed at the stars, observed the surface of the planet, watched the cities grow, and waited for his scanner to issue one of its phony breakdown alarms.

Through the years of boredom, he had developed one secret amusement that he told no one about. By using roundabout search programs and conceal routines, he made it a point to add a little extra to the genetic memory of one of the protos. For the lack of any better ideas, what he added was The System's *Manual of General Procedures and Goals — Planetary Habitation with Resynthesized Defective Personality Structures.*

Being bored during his ten-year term of service was made slightly more interesting by knowing that here and there, all over this sector of the Galaxy, certain randomly selected individuals were waking up with a full set of memories *and* some nonstandard ideas about where their world came from and how it turned out the way it was.

Carmien Nhao had already had his limited fun on this mission, and

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now he leaned back, dreaming of home, and waited for his scanner's next phony alarm.

The great multipetaled flower of ships separated and circled the prepared world. They moved near the atmosphere, and all at once their bellies opened, and millions of cream-white pods drifted slowly toward their specific destinations.

The pods clustered in the great cities, spread far and wide over the open lands, drifted into the houses, positioned themselves, and within an hour, their shells had dissolved, leaving the now-fully developed people motionlessly and silently standing, sitting, or lying, in the midst of their unbegun lives. All across the world, nothing but the winds and clouds and currents in the oceans moved. Birds sat in trees, eyes bright, but none fluttered; none sang.

Ceremoniously, aboard the vast ships, everyone stood and watched the QV image of gray-haired Ravorn Isen, general director of penal institutions, as he smiled and congratulated them on their fine work. Following his brief and predictable speech, he pressed the large and ornate green button that activated the world they had seeded. Below them, everything came to life.

He sat at his desk in the stuffy classroom, and through the window watched a black guy and a white over by the auto shop building argue with each other. A crowd had already started to gather. Everything seemed kind of . . . peculiar all of a sudden.

"Excuse me?"

He looked up. Mr. Donovan had on his ironic smile.

"I know you're all thinking about graduation," the teacher said to him, "but if you can give me just three more days, this will be over, and then you can start worrying about college or getting married or going to Vietnam, God forbid."

"Sorry," Wayne said. His eye caught on the calendar behind Mr. Donovan. It said 1964. That seemed wrong for some reason; he half-expected to see a much higher number.

"You look a little glazed today," Mr. Donovan said.

Wayne twitched his shoulders around in an odd shrug. "I just had a funny feeling for a second there. Things didn't seem . . . right. I guess."

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The teacher reopened his book of Chaucer. "You'll get used to feeling like that," he said. "If you don't, take up writing science fiction. Now. 'Whan that Aprille, with his shoures sote. . . .'"

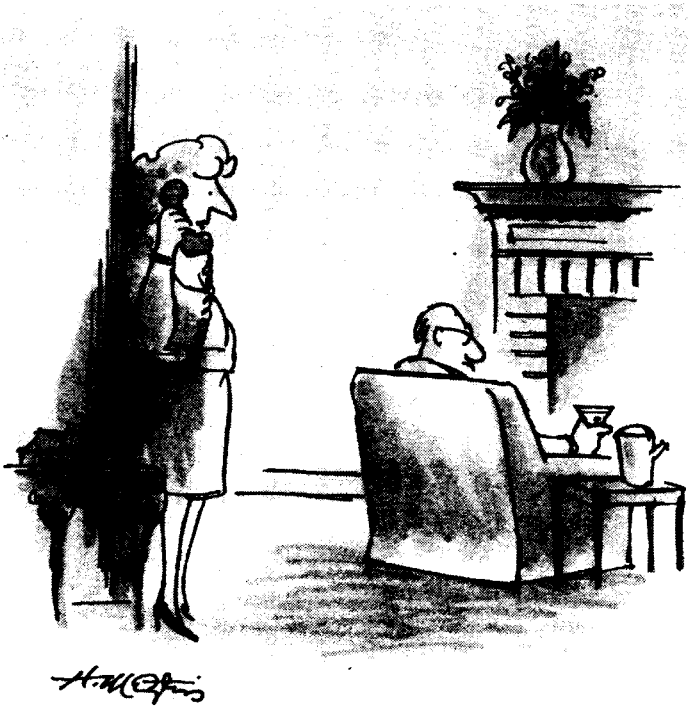
One of the guys by the auto shop yelled something about a head gasket and got slugged in the face.

Defective personality structures, Wayne thought.

As the June sun shone through the sycamores, the two wrestled through the ferns and azaleas, knocking pink blossoms everywhere. A pretty Mexican girl picked up one of the flowers as she strolled by, and stuck it in her black hair.

"'. . . To ferne halwes, couthe in sondry londes. . . .'"

Flowers, fighting, poetry, and the way that girl moved her hips. . . . The place crawled with light and life, violence and strange grace, odd beauty and sudden desire, and after a few moments, he felt curiously at ease.



"May I have him call you back? He's mid martini and a re-broadcast of Orson Welles 'War of the Worlds.'"

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Here is a surprising variation on a classic fantasy theme, in which a young man with a mediocre job in an investment firm plays a deadly game with the numbers and probabilities that run the universe . . .

The Third Effect

By Edward F. Shaver

"There was the Door to which I found no key."
— Edward FitzGerald, *The Rubāiyāt of Omar Khayyām*

I

DAVID SIGHED SOFTLY as the woman's neck brushed against his lips. He kept his eyes closed, savoring the slow rise of his desire through the gauze of sleep.

"David," Jana whispered in the darkness. "David, it's so early. . . ."

He sighed again with more persistence, sliding over her beneath the sheets.

"David," she said firmly, shaking her head to dispel the surrounding warmth of David's bare skin. "David, it's Monday morning, and it's raining." She pulled away enough to watch him from the vantage of her elbows.

"Monday morning," David groaned in resignation. "Not even passion can survive the onslaught of a Monday morning."

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Jana rolled out of bed, flicking on the light.

"I'm sorry, baby," she said as she pulled on her robe. "But you know it's going to be a bastard getting into the city. And you know you've been with the company only a couple of months. You're still trying to make a good impression, remember?"

"I remember. . . ." David finally risked the opening of one eye. "But you tasted awfully good last night, Jana. Good enough to spend a sick day. . . ."

Jana laughed as she turned in the doorway of the bedroom.

"A man might," she nodded. "Fortunately for both of us, I'm a woman. Besides. . . ." Jana smiled as she tightened the sash on her robe with an exaggerated flourish. "Our lovemaking seems to be getting a little more exuberant these days. I just might have to make this arrangement legal to cool you off and give me time to *heal*. . . ."

She wiggled the naked ring finger of her left hand before she turned and disappeared down the hallway. A few moments later there came the familiar kitchen sounds of breakfast. David drew a deep breath, letting the smell of coffee be the catalyst for the exodus from the bed.

Reality surged upward in a cold wave that broke at the moment his feet touched the floor. The bed still smelled of Jana, and David closed his eyes for a moment, considering a final surrender to the warmth of the covers.

But then the numbers whispered from a corner of his mind still numbed by sleep.

Today would be the day.

His pulse quickened, and he rode the rush of resolve toward the bathroom. He hurried through his morning rituals, reviewing the accumulation of ten weeks of data while he watched himself shave.

There was still the question of exactly *how* you defined a miracle, of course. David paused with the razor poised in his hand as he considered the question yet again.

Perhaps *miracle* was a word that would occur only to someone obsessed with the beauty of mathematics and the music of the equations that defined reality. Perhaps it was a word that would occur only to someone living on the fringe of that reality in the first place.

David shrugged uncomfortably at his own lathered reflection in the mirror.

It didn't really matter what the rest of the world might think. A trillion

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was large enough to satisfy his own standards. And on a rainy Monday morning, the odds on his private miracle were going to reach a trillion to one.

II

JANA HAD been right in her predictions. The commute into the city quickly became a crown jewel in the annals of Monday-morning misery. David waited out the trains and buses while the steady drizzle soaked its way down through his umbrella and raincoat. By the time he reached the lobby of Fenton & Fenton, his morning paper had become a swollen sponge, and his shoes were reservoirs of damp around his feet. But all the discomfort and aggravation faded with the first glimpse of the elevators.

There were seven elevators in the lobby: four to the right, three to the left. David had begun the mind game on his first morning in the building almost ten weeks ago, and he would have certainly abandoned it by now had it not been for the miracle of elevator number seven.

It was a simple tabulation; a matter of elementary probability. With seven elevators, the chances of riding any one in particular were obviously one in seven. And so he had begun to keep a mental record of his trips through the lobby, just as he idly tabulated the results each time he tossed a coin, or shuffled a deck of cards.

But with the coins and the cards, reality had always yielded to the invisible leash of probability. Like a curious dog, it would sometimes stray for an occasional interval, but always in the end, reality would conform to the expected curves of rational statistics. Heads and tails would meander back to the norm of one in two; the ace of spades would appear on the cut a little less than twice in a hundred; but elevator number seven was different.

In all of his trips through the main lobby and the one on his floor, David had never once seen the inside of elevator number seven. Never *once*, in spite of the apparent insistence by statistics that he should have ridden it as often as any other elevator in the building.

There were times he wondered if anyone else had stumbled across this apparent violation of the laws of chance. But he had long since learned that very few people shared his own fascination with the numbers and probabilities that ran the universe.

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"They're only *numbers!*" Jana would sigh whenever she caught him counting coin tosses. "Squiggles on a piece of paper, David. Now if you want to see something *real*. . . ."

And then she would give a laugh that reached down and found the hidden heart of an animal buried inside him. A place where the only realities were the primal instincts of food, and sex, and blood. Where numbers meant nothing at all. . . .

It was the same laugh he would remember every time he considered telling someone else about the anomaly of elevator number seven. And so he kept the question to himself, and continued to add to the statistics stored carefully in his head.

David was frowning as he studied the indicator over the polished metal doors of number seven, watching as they recorded its movements somewhere in the thirty floors overhead. The elevator seemed to be descending quickly toward the lobby, and he felt a sudden rush of panic as he saw the string of his private miracle unraveling before his eyes.

"Don't," he whispered under his breath.

And, as if in answer to his plea, elevator number seven slowed and stopped at an upper floor, allowing another car to chime its arrival in the lobby.

The crowd of office workers shuffled forward, and David let the press carry him toward the elevator.

Don't. . . .

His own voice came back with a disturbing ring, and he found himself searching for the vague outlines of something in the deeper shadows of his mind. He was still frowning when the elevator had finally filled and the doors began to close.

"Good morning, David."

The words came from the crowd behind him, carrying an impatience that seemed to indicate they'd been spoken more than once.

He turned as a hand snaked from out of the crowd and used his elbow as an anchor. The sour smile of Wellsly Marsh appeared a moment later, followed by a tall and angular body as his friend sidled to the front of the car.

Marsh had joined the company of Fenton & Fenton on the same day as David, though he was by no means a recent collegian. In fact, he'd graduated from an Ivy League school almost ten years before, and had begun a

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career of mediocrity that required occasional lifelines from a wealthy family in Boston. Both he and David had been assigned to work in the mathematical-modeling branch of the investment firm, and as such had become comrades-in-arms despite their difference in temperament and attitudes.

"Beautiful morning, don't you think?" Wellsly mocked brightly, watching as the water ran down the length of his raincoat.

"A gem," David agreed. "Is something the matter, Wellsly? It's a rainy Monday morning, and you're in danger of being on time for work."

"Couldn't be helped," Wellsly said bluntly. "I struck out all weekend, and, as a result, there was no one of interest to keep me in bed this morning. All in all, very depressing. And I figured that as long as I was depressed. . . ."

"You might as well be in the hallowed halls of Fenton & Fenton. . . ," David concluded with a solemn nod.

The elevator began to climb through the thirty stories of the building, and Wellsly began a detailed account of his amorous misadventures of the weekend, oblivious to the growing discomfort of an older woman standing right behind them. But David only nodded vaguely at the appropriate lulls, his mind distracted by the returning echo of his own voice.

Don't. . . .

And suddenly he was colder than the rain had made him, shivering as he caught the first glimpse of the thing hiding in the shadows of his private little miracle.

III

IT WAS almost lunchtime when Wellsly tapped the control key of his computer console with a wide flourish.

"Do you ever wonder, David?" he asked, leaning back in his chair with a thoughtful expression. "Do you ever wonder how much money is made with these little mathematical models we create? Or, more important, how it would all look bundled up in small denominations right here on my desk?"

David looked up from his own console at the sound of his name, but it took several moments for the question to filter down to where some corner of his mind cared to answer.

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"Money isn't everything," he said finally.

"No," Wellsly nodded thoughtfully. "But it can certainly buy a lot of whatever it isn't." He jabbed another key on the console and launched himself out of the chair.

"Come on." Wellsly leaned close over David's shoulder. "What say we make an early escape for the chow lines? I've heard about a little place on Ninety-first where the waitresses all wear see-through nurses' uniforms."

David continued to stare at the screen, mesmerized by a column of slowly changing numbers.

"Why don't you go on without me, Wellsly," he mumbled finally. "Maybe I'll catch up with you later. . . ."

Wellsly clicked impatiently as he straightened.

"What is that you're working on, David? What could be more important than lunch and *nurses!*"

"They aren't really nurses, Wellsly," David corrected absently. "And these are simple probabilities."

"Probabilities?" Wellsly began to smile. "Probabilities of what? Me getting laid by a pseudonurse? Us getting lunch?"

"Elevators," David answered without the smallest reflection of the other man's smile.

"Elevators?" Wellsly frowned in disbelief. "I'm talking nurses, and you're talking *elevators!*"

"I'm serious," David insisted, swiveling around in the chair. "Would you say that you've ridden all the elevators in this building an equal number of times?"

"David. . . ." Wellsly shook his head.

"Think," David pressed. "Is there one you've never ridden at all?"

Wellsly released a sigh of exasperation.

"Look, David. In the first place, who pays attention to the elevators? A door opens; you get on and hope there's a good-looking woman inside. And in the second place, what does it matter?"

David turned back toward the computer terminal.

"It matters because of probability," he said stubbornly. "It matters because something that *shouldn't* be happening *is* happening, and there must be an explanation."

Wellsly stared down at his friend for a long moment, and then sagged into the seat beside him.

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"All right," he said reluctantly. "I know I'm going to regret this, but tell me about your mystery."

David pursed his lips for a moment, waiting for the last-remembered echo of Jana's laughter to fade, and then he tapped a few keys on the terminal.

"It really is basic probability," he began as a new set of numbers played on the screen. "You assume an equal chance of any elevator arriving in the lobby while you're there to see it. And, as long as all the elevators are functioning, the probability holds. Then the chances of any one elevator *never* arriving while you're there is simply the product of the probabilities of the other elevators."

"Get to the point," Wellsly chaffed. "There are nurses waiting. . . ."

David bit his lip and continued, "You have to understand how simple it is, Wellsly. That's when the numbers become so . . . unbelievable." He shook his head once, as if unsettled by his own choice of words.

"I've been keeping track of the elevators to arrive since my first day in this building." David nodded toward the computer screen. "This morning was the 184th run in the experiment. That's how many times I've waited for an elevator since I've worked here. And for the 184th time, one particular elevator was not the one that showed up. The equation is simple: the probability of one elevator in seven not arriving, taken to the 184th power." He pressed another key and leaned back as the result blossomed on the screen.

"A trillion to one, Wellsly." David frowned and shook his head. "The odds against that happening are a trillion to one."

There was a short interval of silence, and then Wellsly lurched from the chair with a burst of honest laughter.

"David," he said, gasping for breath. "You're amazing. I've got to admit it."

"Wellsly, damn you. I'm serious."

"I know you are, my friend." Wellsly paused to wipe the tears from his eyes. "But for a man so enamored of numbers, you have one fatal flaw." The laughter erupted again, and it took him several seconds to stifle it away.

"What are you trying to say?" David pressed. "That I've made a mistake?"

"No, David," Wellsly answered. "I'm saying you just can't *count*. You

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see, there are only *six* elevators in this building. . . ."

IV

DAVID STOOD for a long while in the lobby of the twentieth floor; an island in the evening exodus from the offices all around. Several times he heard his name come from the passing crowd, but never loud enough to break his concentration on the polished metal doors of elevator number seven.

How could an apparition mesh so well with the trappings of everyday life? And why this? Why not pink elephants or headless horsemen?

Because it's *yours.*

David jumped as the answer appeared in his head. It made sense, of course. He was not the kind of man to believe in something beyond the realm of probability. There were no pink elephants or headless horsemen, but there were elevators. . . .

He stood his ground until the halls began to grow silent, trying to recall that first moment he'd stepped across the invisible line of insanity.

V

JANA WAS waiting at the end of the station platform when he finally stumbled off the train. The rain had decided to come again with the evening, and it formed a halo of fine mist around each of the lights on the platform.

"David?" Jana said as he walked toward her. "You look terrible. Do you feel all right?"

David closed his eyes at the warmth of her hand on his forehead.

"It was just a hard day," he answered weakly.

"Come on," Jana frowned. "Let's get home and get something to eat. You look like you've seen a ghost."

David shuddered at the words, pressing his face into the warmth of her neck. His tongue moved across her skin, and he could taste the tangy sweetness of the bruise that remained from their lovemaking of the night before.

"David," Jana interrupted a moment later, pulling his face into view. "We're standing in the middle of a train station."

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"There aren't any laws. . . ," he began, but he could see the resolve in her eyes. "It's just that I feel so drained. Something happened today. Or rather . . . something has been happening every day for the past two and a half months."

"What are you talking about?" Jana tried to catch his gaze. "What happened to make you so upset? My God, you didn't get fired. . . ."

David shook his head wearily, letting her take him by the hand and lead him toward the car.

"No, Jana." His voice was distant, the halfhearted work of a mind scrutinizing itself. "But I did see a ghost. . . ."

* * *

VI

JANA PULLED to a stop in the no-parking zone in front of the building. She watched David staring out the passenger window, gripping the steering wheel for a long moment before she cut off the engine.

"We can't park here," David said without turning away from the window.

"It's after midnight," Jana answered, opening the door. "No one is going to care."

David was waiting on the sidewalk when she came around the car, the uncertainty obvious on his face.

"Maybe. . . ." He shook his head as he stared up at the dark glass of the building. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea. Maybe I just need a vacation. . . ."

"No, David," Jana said firmly. "It has to be settled in your own mind. You know that as well as I do." She took hold of his arm and steered him toward the entrance.

Their footsteps echoed across the wet pavement, rebounding from the doors of the building and coming back like the sound of an invisible crowd. The security guard glanced up from his magazine as they came through the doors, taking only a moment to decide they weren't a threat.

"I'm David Turing," David said as he approached the security desk. "Of Fenton & Fenton. I need to get some papers from my office."

He signed the ledger book and caught the guard's curious glance at Jana.

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"My fiancée," he offered. "Does she need to sign?"

The guard merely shook his head and returned to his magazine.

David walked back to Jana, uncomfortably aware of the sharp echoes that his own footsteps sent skidding across the floors of the empty lobby.

"So where are these damned elevators?" Jana asked with forced bravado.

"Around the corner," David nodded, but he continued to stare down at ripples of black in the marble at his feet.

Jana felt the resistance in his arm, leaning close until he met her gaze.

"Come on, David. Let's get it done, and then we can go home and make love all night long. You can't lett some damned hallucination take control of your life."

David laughed suddenly, rolling back his head.

"But that's the *point*, Jana." He stopped quickly, glancing back at the guard. Then he continued at a whisper. "I don't know how important it might be. What does it mean if I walk around the corner and still see seven while you see six? Does it mean that I'm crazy?"

Jana shook her head and looked away to hide the flurry of emotions on her face.

"I don't know what it means, David," she said as she knit the fingers of her hands into a knot. "But I know that you've got to face it either way."

She led him around the corner, coming to a halt in the middle of the elevator lobby. The polished metal doors shone dully in the subdued lighting, casting back the imperfect reflections of the man and woman.

David closed his eyes, unwilling to face his own warped image in the doors of number seven.

"How many, David?" Jana asked slowly. "Open your eyes and tell me how many you see."

David swallowed from a dry mouth and opened his eyes. The desperation in her voice had been the final straw, and his choice was made.

"Six," he lied evenly. "Only six."

Jana studied him hard for a moment, and then she released a long sigh of relief.

"Thank God." She turned slowly in a circle, surveying the doors on either side. "Tell me where you thought you saw this seventh elevator. It doesn't look like there's room for even a mirage. . . ."

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David clenched his hand into a fist, motioning toward the doors of number seven.

Jana followed his directions, pressing her face close to the solid slab of tawny marble that covered the wall.

"Here?" she asked over her shoulder.

"There," David answered, turning to see her face reflected in the doors of the imaginary elevator. Then his gaze drifted up to the indicator above the doors, and he felt his stomach churn as it rolled into a knot.

The car of number seven was moving downward from the fifteenth floor, picking up speed as it approached the lobby.

For a dozen frenzied heartbeats, David froze. Part of him wanted to wait, to force the apparition to make an appearance while Jana was with him. But another part was suddenly afraid, as if a different side of the nightmare was coming into focus.

What if the continued presence of a nonexistent elevator was only the first effect in some longer chain of circumstance? Probability *was* tied to reality, and every madness *must* have a reason. . . .

David darted across the lobby, grabbing Jana by the arm.

"Come on," he said sharply. "We've seen enough."

He dragged her back out into the night, listening all the while for the chimes of number seven to sound behind them. Jana pulled herself free of his grasp as they stepped into the light rain, wheeling to face him with a look of suspicion.

"David . . . are you *sure* you're all right? It wouldn't make any difference to me if you. . . ." She groped for the right words. "If you need some kind of help. I love you, David. . . ."

David filled his lungs with the heavy air, smiling as he felt the weight of uncertainty lifting from his shoulders. Now he knew what had to be done to put an end to the nightmare. Perhaps he'd known it from that very first day, and it had only been a matter of time and acceptance.

What would be the point of a lock without a key, or a door that never opened?

He would have to cash his ticket on a trillion-to-one shot. He would have to take a ride on elevator number seven, and he would have to do it alone. That was the reason for it all.

"David, I love you. . . ."

"I know, Jana," he answered quietly. "But I won't be needing a shrink. I promise. You've got the only cure I need tonight. . . ."

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VII

IT WAS late the following afternoon when Wellsly caught him staring out the window of the computer center. The sun had finally returned, making the city gleam like a car fresh from the wash.

"Where the hell have you been all day, David?" Wellsly dropped unceremoniously into a nearby chair.

"Sorry," David acknowledged with a nod. He turned reluctantly away from the window. "I suppose I haven't been much use to Fenton & Fenton today."

Wellsly laughed quickly and kicked his feet up on the edge of the desk.

"Don't worry about those bastards." Then he lowered his voice to a stage whisper. "You know, I've heard that our precious pair of Fentons are actually a couple of octogenarians playing golf in Florida. Not here in the flesh at all." His eyebrows danced with their usual energy, but his eyes narrowed as he watched the other man.

"You haven't been worrying about your little brush with the bizarre, have you, David? I assure you from personal experience that one miscounted elevator does not a lunatic make."

David smiled slowly. Wellsly's methods had the subtlety of a kick to the groin, but they were well intentioned.

"I know that I'm not crazy," he said. "But still I sometimes wonder. . . ."

"Always a mistake, David," Wellsly intoned seriously. "Wondering can only lead to questions, and the next thing you know, you're talking to God . . . or someone else without a sense of humor." He got up from the chair as if ready to make an escape.

David smiled again and turned back toward the window.

"But still everything has to have a reason, doesn't it, Wellsly? I mean, even something like a hallucination. It may just be a quirk of nature, but everything has a beginning . . . and an end."

"Wait a minute. . . ." Wellsly raised his hands in surrender. "In the first place, I don't see why nature shouldn't be allowed a few unintentioned quirks along with the rest of us. I know I do *my* share. And in the second . . . this is becoming a very weird discussion, David. Why don't you consider making an early exit? Let's get out of here and hit a few bars. I've heard of a place on Thirty-third where the waitresses —"

"Maybe tomorrow," David interrupted gently. "Tonight I've got some things that have to get done."

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Wellsly watched him for a moment, and then shrugged.

"In that case," Wellsly said, gathering up his coat, "*I'll* leave early. If anyone comes looking for me, just tell them. . . ." He trailed into a frowning silence as he reached the doorway. "On second thought, I don't think anyone *ever* comes looking for *me*."

"Good-bye, Wellsly."

David waited for the door to close behind Wellsly before reaching for the phone. Jana picked up on the second ring, the concern coloring her voice as soon as she knew it was him.

"Why do you have to work late *tonight*, David? I don't think you need to be there alone. . . ."

"Come on, baby," David scolded gently. "I thought we settled all that last night?"

"Did we, David?" she asked slowly. "Tell me we did, and I won't worry anymore."

"We did," he answered, swiveling in the chair so that he could see the clock on the wall.

Ten minutes to five.

"I should be ready to leave about nine. Would you mind picking me up downstairs?"

There was a pause, and then Jana said simply, "I love you, David. See you at nine."

"I love you," David echoed, and then he set the phone gingerly into the cradle, as if afraid that any sharp sound might puncture the bubble of his resolve.

He leaned back in the chair, eyes fixed on the clock as he watched the second hand sweep slowly around. In another few minutes the halls would begin to sound with the afternoon throngs. He had calculated that the building would be totally empty by nine o'clock, and that by then he would be alone with elevator number seven. Perhaps when they were alone, it would come for him, just as it had seemed ready to do the night before.

That would be the second effect in the chain of invisible logic. He wasted most of the hours to follow trying to imagine the third.

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VIII

DAVID STOOD for a long while in the half-light of the elevator lobby on the twentieth floor. The call button shone brightly with its own illumination, taunting him in silence.

Finally he stepped forward, wiping the sweat from his palm before he reached out and tapped the button. He glanced over his shoulder to watch the indicators for the other elevators, wondering how many of the real variety he would have to send away empty before the phantom answered his call.

But for once the indicator of number seven was the only one to move, as if it had arranged some special agreement with its six reflections in the real world. David placed a trembling hand against the doors of number seven, holding his breath as he felt the faint rumble of nonexistent mechanisms through the cool metal.

He saw the distorted reflection of his own face in the doors; the frown of confusion that was exaggerated by the warp of the metal. And in that moment he understood.

The apparition was meant for him alone, but it was necessary that he *believe*. There were some men who might have believed in pink elephants or headless horsemen, but not David Turing. The ticket for him was an elevator, and the bait was a trillion-to-one wrinkle in the laws of probability. Everything had been designed to bring him here to take this solitary ride, as if *he* was an intregral part of some grander twist in the fabric of nature.

Would he find God himself waiting on the other side of the metal doors? David shook his head reflexively at the thought, blinking as the indicator for number seven began to climb steadily up from the lower floors.

Ten . . . fifteen . . . eighteen . . . and then it slowed, zeroing in on twenty.

David closed his eyes, clenching his fists as the muffled sound of machinery came from just beyond the doors. Then there came the warning chime, ringing like a fire bell inside his head.

He fought the impulse to turn and run, holding his breath as he heard the doors swish slowly open.

Please don't be the Devil. The prayer had come unannounced from some forgotten corner of childhood terrors, and the words surprised him enough to open his eyes.

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What greeted him was nothing more than the interior of an ordinary elevator, indentical in every detail to all the others in the building. The walls were sheathed in fake-wood vinyl, and the overhead light glowed down through a plastic ceiling. Not exactly a vision of Heaven or Hell.

David released the breath that was stuck in his lungs as he leaned forward to peer into the car.

To the right of the door was the control panel with the normal complement of buttons, with the one for the twentieth floor glowing brightly.

At first there was confusion. He couldn't begin to understand why a miracle had been worked to show him the inside of an everyday elevator. But then he remembered his own logic; the persistence of the phantom was only the first effect. His *use* of the phantom would be the second.

He hesitated a final moment, eyes narrowing with a flash of calculation. He thrust a hand into his pocket, fishing out the day's accumulation of odds and ends. Sixty-three cents in change, two paper clips, and a stick of gum. He tallied the contents, and then returned them to his pocket as he stepped onto the elevator.

IX

I'VE JUST walked through a wall, he thought as he turned to stare out at the vacant lobby.

But his heart still thumped in his chest, and the sweat still flowed beneath his clothes, all giving credence to his continued reality.

He tapped the button for the main lobby, and then leaned against the rear wall of the car, drawing some vague comfort from a solid presence at his back. The doors waited only a moment before they closed, and then the phantom machinery began to vibrate. His stomach jumped at the first sense of motion, but settled quickly when the motion remained nothing more than the steady descent of an elevator.

David stood braced against the wall for the short eternity of the ride, holding his breath as he waited for something to happen. But the elevator offered nothing more than a gentle deceleration, and finally a mild jolt as it came to a halt.

The door rolled open to show him the familiar marbled shadows of the main lobby of Fenton & Fenton.

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David hesitated again, but now the hesitation was accompanied by a growing sense of relief. He stepped across the threshold of the car, relishing the smoothness of the marble beneath his feet. He scanned the lobby quickly, searching out the details that would confirm his return to normal. The directory of occupants stared back from the wall to his right; in one corner was the same wilting potted tree; in the other a waste can.

Everything was in order, just as it had been before he'd entered elevator number seven on the twentieth floor. He held his breath as he emptied his pockets for a second time and counted out the sixty-three cents, two paper clips, and the stick of gum.

David took a few steps across the lobby, until he had a vantage of the security desk. The same guard glanced up from his magazine, frowning at the interruption. When David turned around again, elevator number seven was gone.

He swallowed hard at the silent disappearance of his phantom. From somewhere there came the cold touch of doubt, riding on the avalanche of his own logic.

Could it all have been for nothing? A moth hole in the fabric of reality that had been visible only to him?

David glanced once more at the wall where the doors of number seven had always been. Then he hurried across the lobby, bursting out into the chill of the night.

He didn't understand what had happened, or why it had chosen to happen to *him*. All that mattered now was that he'd faced his challenge and sent it back into the realm of half-remembered dreams. He had played the game with the universe . . . and won.

David hesitated only a moment before he bounded across the sidewalk toward Jana's car waiting at the curb.

"David?" Jana smiled as he settled heavily onto the seat beside her. "What's all this about?" She laughed as his hands roamed clumsily across the front of her dress.

"It's about love," he breathed as he kissed her quickly. "It's about being reborn. . . ." He kissed her again, this time opening her lips with his tongue.

"David . . . can't it wait until we get home? What if someone comes by. . . ."

But his mouth was over hers again before she could finish. She moaned lightly as he traced his tongue down the side of her neck, parting her legs

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at the touch of his hand on her thigh.

She moaned again as she felt his teeth graze her skin, and then she screamed.

Jana slammed herself back against the door of the car, staring at David in confusion as she pressed a hand to the wound in her neck.

"What did you do?" she asked, incredulous. "You actually bit me. . . ."

"Jana." David reached out in concern as he saw the heavy flow coming from between her fingers. "You shouldn't have pulled away like that. . . ."

"Shouldn't have pulled away?" Her voice was harsher as the pain began to register. "You hurt me, David. You hurt me on *purpose*. . . ."

"No, Jana." David shook his head as she recoiled away from his hand. He ran his tongue across the needle-like jags behind his incisors. "I just needed a little now, baby. Just a little. . . ."

"You needed what, David?" Jana stared in disbelief as she pulled her hand away from her neck. The palm was coated with the warm fluid, and she could feel the damp as it flowed down into her dress. "You needed *blood!* My God. . . ."

She turned her palm outward, displaying it like a crucifix.

"You've gone mad," she said, her words beginning to slur as she fumbled with the handle of the door. "You've gone mad. . . ."

David shuddered as he saw the disgust in her eyes. Disgust where there should have been passion to match his own. He could still taste her on his tongue, and the tangle of his own emotions had left him empty of words.

"Jana, please. . . ."

He reached for her again, and she screamed with a force that sent another gush of blood from her wound. The door sprang open behind her, and she sprawled into the street.

"Stay away from me," she hissed, sliding backward away from the car. "Stay away. . . ."

"Jana. . . ." David followed her into the rain, his vision dimming as his heart raced with the first premonition of truth.

"Somebody help me!" the woman screamed, but then her head began to roll. The life was draining out through the gash in her neck, and the struggle for consciousness was almost over.

David turned sharply at the touch of other eyes. The security guard had come out of the building, peering through the mist as Jana's body

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crumpled onto the glistening pavement.

"Hey, buddy. Stay right where you are. . . ."

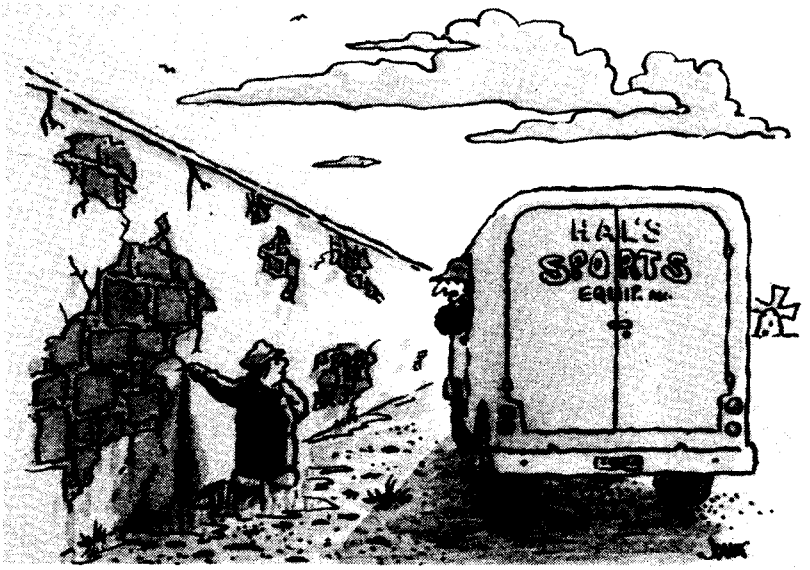
But another instinct was already giving the orders. David began to run, the rain filling his eyes as he felt the hard ground pounding through the soles of his shoes. He ran toward the safety of the darkness. He ran until the hunger had weakened his legs. He ran until he knew the truth.

He was the third effect. In spite of the reassuring sameness in the view around him, in spite of the sixty-three cents in his pocket, everything had changed. He had found a doorway into a strange new world where the blood and passion of men and women were separate.

When he could run no more, he stumbled into an alley and sagged against a wall, fighting for his breath as he tried to think. The hunger was growing stronger, becoming a pain that began from somewhere deep inside. In his mouth there remained a last, tantalizing hint of Jana's sweet blood.

Am I a curse, or the answer to a prayer?

David stared up past the dark walls of the alley toward the bleeding sky. He did not know the answer to his own question, and perhaps he never would. But for now there was the hunger, and from the distance, the sound of unsuspecting footsteps.



"You the guy who ordered the size 3 wet suit and scuba gear?"

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE TRUE RULERS

I HAVE ALWAYS found the history of ancient Greece to be a gold mine of good stories, and for some reason I remember them all.

Consider Themistocles, for instance. He was the Athenian leader who persuaded the city to invest in a fleet while they awaited the attack of the Persians. In 480 B.C., the Persians came, swept down from the north, took Athens, and burned it. The Athenian population had fled to the islands, protected by the Athenian fleet, and now that fleet (plus ships from other Greek cities) was waiting for the Persian fleet in the narrow strait between Athens and the island of Salamis.

The titular leader of the fleet was Eurybiades of Sparta (which was then the leading military power among the Greek cities). The Spartans were faultlessly brave on land, but a little nervous at sea. Eurybiades wanted to retreat to protect Sparta, seeing that Athens had already been destroyed, but Themistocles wanted to stay and fight.

Themistocles argued his case with such pertinacity that Eurybiades, exasperated at the eloquent flow of words, raised his staff of office threateningly. Themistocles threw his arms wide.

"Strike," he said, "but *listen*."

Eurybiades decided to stay. Themistocles, in order to make sure he did not change his mind, sent a messenger to the Persian king Xerxes, suggesting that he station ships at both ends of the strait of Salamis so as to trap the Greek fleet.

Came the morning. The Greek ships found themselves penned in, had no choice but to fight, and destroyed the Persians. The battle of Salamis was the decisive engagement of the Persian war.

After the battle, the captains of the Greek ships got together to vote on who should get the prize for achievement in their great victory. Every single captain voted for

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himself in first place, and every single captain voted for Themistocles in second place.

There is a story that Themistocles, now at the height of his fame, was sneered at by a Greek from some small backwoods Greek town. He said, "You would not have achieved fame, had you happened to have been born in my small town." And Themistocles answered, "Nor you, had you happened to have been born in Athens."

But my favorite Themistocles story is the one in which he pointed to his infant son and said, "There is the ruler of Greece."

"That child," said someone else in amazement.

"Certainly," said Themistocles, "for Athens rules Greece, and I rule Athens, and my wife rules me, and that child rules my wife."

So let's find out who rules the Earth, and in the discussion that follows I will have to permit a little overlapping with an article I published in February 1973 F&SF entitled *"Through the Microglass."* That was sixteen years ago, though, and perhaps some of you missed it. Besides, I'm going to take up the matter from a different angle.

Back in the last quarter of the 1600's, a Dutchman named Anton van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723) had, as his hobby, the grinding of tiny, excellent lenses, through which he could see things magnified up to two hundred times. Some were no larger than the head of a pin, but through them he could see tiny things more clearly than any other person of his time. He ground a total of 419 lenses over a fifty year period, working right down to the end of his long life.

He was the first, in 1673, to discover one-celled organisms, too small to see without a microscope, yet as indubitably alive as the largest whale. He saw capillaries and red blood cells and yeast cells and spermatozoa.

His greatest discovery, however, came in 1683, when he observed and drew pictures of the smallest things that his best lenses could show him. He didn't know what they were, and no one else would see them for another century. However, looking at the pictures he drew, we know that van Leeuwenhoek was the first man ever to see bacteria.

Of course, that's not what van Leeuwenhoek called them. He called all the tiny living things he saw "animalcules" ("small animals" in Latin). Nowadays, we lump them together as "microorganisms" ("small animals" in Greek).

The first person who really tried to *study* the bacteria was a Danish biologist, Otto Friedrich Muller

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(1730-1784). His observations appeared in a book that was published posthumously in 1786.

He was the first to try to classify microorganisms generally into categories, that is into species and genera in the fashion made popular a half-century earlier by Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778). However, Linnaeus worked with plants and animals easily visible to the eye and could make classifications on the basis of detailed differences and similarities of clearly seen parts.

Microorganisms, on the other hand, were tiny, and very little detail could be seen in them. Nothing much could be done except to judge them by their overall shape, particularly where bacteria were concerned. That was like trying to classify ordinary plants and animals by the shadows they cast. Muller did notice, however, that some bacteria were shaped like tiny rods and some like tiny corkscrews. The former he called "bacilli" or, in the singular, "bacillus" ("small rod" in Latin); and the latter he called "spirilla" or, in the singular, "spirillum" ("small spiral in Latin).

Spirilla retains its specialized meaning, but bacilli is sometimes used as a synonym for bacteria generally.

It seemed unlikely, in Muller's time, that anyone would ever be able to see bacteria any more clearly than Muller did. The lenses used in microscopes refracted light to a different extent as the wavelength changed. You could bring one wavelength into focus, but the others would remain out of focus and show up as obscuring rings of color about the object you were trying to see.

In 1830, however, a British lensmaker, Joseph Jackson Lister (1786-1869), succeeded in forming microscope lenses out of two different kinds of glass. Each kind reflected light differently with respect to wavelength, and if they were combined in just the right way, the color effects of one were just cancelled by those of the other. It became an "achromatic lens" ("no color" in Greek).

Using "achromatic microscopes," the focus could be made sharp without obscuring rings of color, and only then did it become possible to study something as small as bacteria in a meaningful way.

Then, in the 1860's, the French chemist Louis Pasteur (1822-1895) began to insist that infectious disease was the result of the spread of specific microorganisms from one person to another. This was the greatest single medical discovery of all time and focused attention wonderfully on microorganisms.

Inspired by Pasteur's work, the German botanist Ferdinand Julius

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Cohn (1828-1898) became the first scientist to concentrate his life's work on bacteria. In 1872, he published a three volume treatise on bacteria that may be considered to have founded the science of bacteriology. He went much further than Muller did in the classification of bacteria and was the first to describe bacterial spores and their resistance to even boiling temperatures.

He kept Muller's division of bacteria into bacilli and spirilla but went further. He noted that some rod-shaped bacteria were longer than others. He reserved the word "bacilli" for the longer rods. For the shorter ones, he was the first to make use of "bacteria," or in the singular, "bacterium" (also "small rod" in Latin).

For some reason, bacteria came to be the term used most often for these microorganisms generally, although still other terms also came into use. Thus, the German pathologist Christian A. T. Billroth (1829-1894) called bacteria that had the shape of tiny spheres, "cocci" or, in the singular, "coccus" ("berry" in Greek). Some varieties are "streptococcus," "staphylococcus" and "pneumococcus."

Then, too, the French biologist Charles Sedillot introduced the term "microbe" ("small life" in Greek) for all minute organisms that caused disease, putrefaction, or fermentation. Microbe is another word that is sometimes applied to bacteria generally.

A still more general term that came into use at the beginning of the 1800's is the one that is least applicable to bacteria specifically, but is most often used in that way by the general public. It is "germ" ("sprout" in Latin), and it can be used to indicate any tiny object from which life can spring.

Thus, the portion of a seed which contains the actual living material can be considered the germ, so that we speak of things like "wheat germ." Again, life springs from sperm and ova, so these are called "germ cells." In the developing embryo, the primitive groups of cells from which organs eventually develop are called "germ layers."

As a matter of fact, Pasteur's thoughts on infectious disease are usually referred to as the "germ theory of disease," which is correct actually, since bacteria are by no means the only pathogenic organisms. Disease can also be caused by viruses, molds, protozoa, parasitic worms, and so on.

The most obvious property that separates bacteria from other cells is size. One-celled organisms that are not bacteria may be large enough to be on the edge of being visible to the unaided eye. They have to be

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since they must pack a great deal of functioning into their single cell. An amoeba, for instance, is about 200 micrometers (1/125th of an inch) across.

The cells that make up multicellar organisms are smaller than this. They don't have to carry a full load of material for independent life. They can share the labor with other cells. The human liver cell, for instance, is about 12 micrometers across. About 2400 human liver cells would fit into an amoeba.

A typical bacterium may, however, be only 2 micrometers across. Bacteria are the smallest free living bits of life that are on Earth or, possibly, the smallest there can be. The smallest bacteria we know are about 0.02 micrometers across. About 200,000,000 of these smallest bacteria can fit into the cell of an amoeba.

(There are living objects, called viruses, that are smaller than bacteria, but none of them are free living. They can only grow and reproduce inside a living cell.)

Where do bacteria fit in the hierarchy of life? When I was young, I learned that all life was divided into two "kingdoms," plants and animals. I gathered that bacteria were placed, a little uncomfortably, within the plant kingdom. Alternatively, plants and animals included only multicellular life, while all unicellular life made up a third kingdom called "Protista" ("first" in Greek).

To understand the present view, we must go back to 1831, when the British botanist Robert Brown (1773-1858) was the first to notice that inside ordinary cells there were tiny structures. He called these "nuclei," or, in the singular, "nucleus" ("little nut" in Latin) since they were found inside the cell, like a nut inside a shell.

As it eventually turned out, the nucleus of a cell contains the genetic material that controls cell reproduction. The genetic material replicates itself during cell division and passes in more or less exact copy from parent cell to daughter cell, and, in a larger sense, from parent organism to child organism.

Each complete cell in all multicellular organisms contains a nucleus, whether these organisms are plants or animals. (There are, to be sure, incomplete cells such as red blood corpuscles, which do not contain nuclei, but they are short lived and neither grow nor divide.)

Multicellular animals and plants, therefore, can be lumped together, as both being made up of nucleated cells or "eukaryotes" ("true nucleus" in Greek). In addition, one-celled animal cells such as amoebae and one-celled plant cells such as "algae" or, in the sin-

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gular, "alga" ("seaweed" in Latin) are eukaryotes.

In other words, plants and animals, including all the multicellular forms, together with the larger unicellular forms, may be considered to form a "superkingdom" of "Eukaryota."

Bacterial cells, on the other hand, do not contain nuclei. That does not mean that they do not contain genetic material. They must, for they grow and multiply. The genetic material is not sequestered in a nucleus, however, but is distributed throughout the bacterial cell. Or, you might say that the bacterial cell is essentially a free living cellular nucleus, and that is why it is so small. (However, the bacterial cell also contains structures that, in eukaryotes, are contained outside the nucleus.)

Bacterial cells and any cells, in fact, that do not contain a clearly delimited nucleus, but have genetic material distributed through the cell are "prokaryotes" ("before the nucleus" in Greek) and might be considered as being included in the superkingdom of "Prokaryota." In a way, we divide life into two parts: bacteria and everything else.

The word prokaryote implies that bacteria are more primitive than the eukaryotes and, therefore, that they may have evolved and existed before the eukaryotes did.

If we go back into the fossil record, we find that we are dealing with relics of multicellular creatures on the order of our own complexity, and many of them are quite large. From their resemblance to creatures living today, it is quite clear that all these fossils are eukaryotes.

The oldest fossils we find are about 600,000,000 years old, and they cannot represent the oldest forms of life, because, for one thing, even the oldest fossils are quite complex in structure and must already have had a long evolutionary history. Furthermore, the Earth is 4,600,000,000 years old so that the ordinary fossil remains occupy only a little over the final eighth of planetary history, and there is plenty of time for earlier evolution.

Indeed, the fossils we usually study are primarily those multicellular organisms that have managed to develop hard structures — shells, bones, teeth — that easily fossilize. Before them must have been multicellular organisms that did not have hard parts, and the earliest of these may have been 800,000,000 years old.

We can go still farther back, however. The American paleontologist Elso Sterrenberg Barghoorn (1915-1984), beginning in 1954, worked with very old rocks in southern Ontario. He shaved thin

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slices of these rocks and studied them under the microscope. In them, he found circular structures that were about the size of protozoa. What's more, there were signs of smaller structures within these remnants that resembled the kind of structures within cells.

It seemed clear that these were fossils of unicellular organisms, and the oldest of these seem to have been up to 1,400,000,000 years old. This is nearly twice as old as the oldest multicellular organisms, but even so the history of eukaryotes still seems to be squeezed into little more than the final third of Earth's existence. What's more, eukaryotes are sufficiently complex, even in the unicellular form, to require a long evolutionary history.

Sure enough, Barghoorn and his associates detected particularly tiny structures in rocks that were far too old to contain eukaryotes. It now seems that prokaryotes preceded eukaryotes by a long time. The oldest prokaryote remnants so far found have been in rocks that may be up to 3,500,000,000 years old.

This means that prokaryotes had come into existence by the time Earth was, at most, only 1,000,000,000 years old. They then remained the *only* forms of life for over 2,000,000,000 years. For all this time they were the ruling life forms, the true rulers of Earth.

* * *

Once eukaryotes arose, it would seem to us that they took over the rulership of the world, first as unicellular plants and animals, then as multicellular plants and animals of various kinds. The predominant organisms of the sea (fish) and those of the land (amphibia, then reptiles, then animals, and particularly humanity) are all eukaryotes.

However, how do you define "ruling?" The mass of plant life on Earth is ten times that of animal life, and animals can only live as parasites on the plant world. If all plants were to disappear, all animal life would quickly follow them into destruction. If all animals were to disappear, much of the plant world would survive.

To a truly objective extra-terrestrial observer, Earth might seem to be a world of plants, with some advanced trees as "rulers," and with an annoying and unnecessary infestation of free moving parasites. (After all, human beings are composed of trillions of human cells, along with an annoying and unnecessary infestation of parasites on our skins and in our intestines. The parasites are not our rulers just because they live on us.

Let's look at matters in another way. How did eukaryotes develop? There are some who think they arose through the cooperation and

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eventual amalgamation of prokaryotes of various types.

Thus, prokaryotes that had well developed genetic mechanisms, combined with others that had well developed systems for handling free oxygen. In combination, primitive eukaryotes developed with a nucleus well adapted to genetic functioning and, outside it, mitochondria that were well adapted to handling oxygen. Other portions of the cell also arose from appropriately specialized prokaryotes.

In short, eukaryotes may simply be prokaryote combinations, just as multicellular plants and animals are eukaryote combinations. This point of view is strongly upheld by the American biologist Lynn Margulis (b. 1938).

Therefore, we might view all of Earthly life as falling into three classes: 1) prokaryotes, like bacteria; 2) combinations of prokaryotes, like amoebae; and 3) combinations of combinations of prokaryotes, like human beings.

This may be viewed as analogous to the way in which an American state is a combination of people and the American federal government is a combination of states, (a combination of combinations of people).

A good, efficient, and humane goverment gives people a much better life than they would have if each lived entirely in isolation and entirely on his own resource, but it is the American view, just the same, that it is the people who are fundamental. After all, people would exist, however savagely and poorly, without government, but government cannot exist without people.

So there is the temptation to say that the prokaryotes still rule Earth.

Let's tackle it from another standpoint. Although eukaryotes came into existence 1,400,000,000 years ago, and the first multicellular organisms perhaps 800,000,000 years ago, prokaryotes still exist and still flourish.

They exist in such numbers and multiply so rapidly that they evolve at a much faster rate than eukaryotes, either unicellular or multicellular, do. The result is that prokaryotes have evolved into environmental niches that eukaryotes cannot handle. They live at temperatures and at salt concentrations that would kill any eukaryote. They live on inorganic compounds that could not support other forms of life. As spores, they can survive worse conditions for far longer than any other form of life can. When we develop chemicals to kill them, they gradually adapt to that, and we must find new poisons if we are to control them. They are undefeatable, and, when the time comes that destruction, either cos-

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mic or human, ends life generally, the prokaryotes will be the last to go and may well survive even if all other life vanishes.

Who, then, are the true rulers of Earth, if you think about it without prejudice or self-love?

There is still the question of classifying the bacteria. The first bacteriologists, like Muller and Cohn, tried to divide them up on appearance alone, and we ended up with a collection of names that gave us no notion of how different species are related.

Eventually, as biochemical techniques improved, as bacteriologists, learned to study the chemical nature of the cells' constituents, the genes they possessed, the types of chemical reactions they brought about, the chances of working out prokaryote relationships and evolution improved.

One recent system of judging bacterial relationship involves the "ribosomes," which are small objects within all cells, eukaryote and prokaryotes alike, that participate in the production of proteins. Since it is the chemical reactions in each cell that give it its distinctive character, and since those chemical reactions depend on the nature of the proteins formed, it would seem that the ribosomes can change only slowly with time. (They don't have much leeway in the type of proteins they can form.) Therefore, the amount of difference in the ribosomes might be a good measure of the evolutionary distance between two species of organisms.

On the ribosome basis, it turns out that bacteria fall into two distinct groups. There are the ordinary bacteria that we come across most frequently, whose chemical reactions are much like those of cells in general. They are the "eubacteria" ("true bacteria" in Greek).

There are also bacteria that seem to be quite different in their ribosomes and, not surprisingly, are therefore quite unusual in their chemical reactions and way of life as well. These are the "archaebacteria" ("old bacteria" in Greek).

The archaebacteria and eubacteria are as different from each other in terms of their ribosome chemistry as either is from the eukaryotes. This means that we can now divide all organisms that live on Earth (that we know of) into three superkingdoms: Eukaryota, Eubacteria, and Archaebacteria.

Presumably, the archaebacteria are the oldest and most primitive free living organisms we know, and they include three known subgroups. There are bacteria that cannot use oxygen and have a chemistry that ends in the production of methane, rather than carbon diox-

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ide. They are the "methanogens" ("methane-producers" in Greek). Then there are bacteria that thrive in hot, acid waters and are "thermoacidophiles" ("hot acid lovers" in Greek). Finally there are those that prefer very salty water and are "halobacteria" ("salt-bacteria" in Greek).

These three known varieties of archaebacteria presumably arose from a common ancestor that remains unknown to us, either because it no longer exists, or because we haven't discovered it yet. One name that I see used for this most primitive of cells is "progenotes" (which may mean "before birth" in Greek).

From these archaebacteria, there may have arisen the eubacteria and the eukaryotes. We don't know if they arose separately from different groups of archaebacteria. One suggestion is that the first eubacteria evolved from the thermoacidophiles, and the first eukaryotes from the methanogens, but I am not ready to believe that.

I think the eubacteria originated first from one group of archaebacteria, but that then, eukaryotes developed by combinations of eubacteria. I have no evidence for this. It's just what seems fitting to me.

The eubacteria split into a number of subgroups, of which a group that contains chlorophyll is particularly interesting. Since the best known one-celled chlorophyll containing organisms are the algae, these eubacteria were, for a long time, called "blue-green algae" from their color.

However, they are not algae. Algae are eukaryotes, and the so called "blue-green algae" are prokaryotes. They belong to different kingdoms.

For that reason, the "blue-green algae" were first called the "blue-greens" which was a faint hearted compromise, and then "cyanobacteria" ("blue bacteria" in Greek).

The cyanobacteria may have combined with other eubacteria forming what are now the "chloroplasts," the cholorophyll containing structures in plant cells.

The cyanobacteria also produced oxygen during the two billion years they may have existed as the only photosynthesizers in the world. It is to them, then, that we owe the establishment of at least the beginnings of the oxygen atmosphere that supports us all.

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David Brin's new story is not only compelling reading; it is dense with fresh ideas and perspectives. The author writes that it was written partly in aggravation over some stereotypes in today's SF: e.g. "young punk kids who somehow get to be more technologically competent than the best engineers, and a complete aversion to depicting the place of old people in the future."

Privacy

By David Brin

WATCHING, ALL THE time watching.... goggle-eye geeks. Soon as I get out, I'm gonna Patagonia, buy it? *That's* where the youth growth is. More ripe fruit like us, cuzz. And not so many barrel-spoilers . . . rotten old apples that sit an' stink and *stare* atcha. . . ."

Remi agreed with Crat's assessment of the situation. As the three of them strode side by side, Roland also expressed approval, nudging Crat's shoulder. "That's staccato code, boy-oh."

What brought on Crat's sudden outburst was the sight of yet another babushka, glaring at them from a park bench under one of the force-grown trees as Remi and Roland and Crat scrambled up a grassy bank from the culvert where they'd been smoking. The very moment they came into view, the old woman laid her wire-knitting aside and fixed them with the bug-eyed opaque gape of her True-Vu lenses — staring as if they were *freaks* or *aliens* out of some space-fic vid, instead of three perfectly normal guys, just hanging around, doing nobody any harm.

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"My, my!" Remi whined sarcastically. "Is it my *breath*? Maybe she smells . . . *tobacco*!"

"No joke, bloke," Roland replied. "Some of those new goggles've got sniffer sensors on 'em. I hear the geek lobby in Indianapolis wants to put even homegrown on the restrict list."

No shit? *Tobacco*? Even? Roll over, Raleigh! I just gotta move outta this state."

"Settlers ho, Remi?"

"Settlers ho."

The stare got worse as they approached along the gravel path. Remi couldn't see the babushka's eyes, of course. Her True-Vu's burnished lenses didn't really have to be aimed directly at them to get a good record. Still, she jutted out her chin and faced them square on, aggressively making the point that their likenesses, every move they made, were being transmitted to her home unit, blocks from here, in real time.

Why do they have to do that? To Remi, it felt like a provocation. Certainly no one could mistake that tight-lipped expression of hers as *friendly*.

Remi and his pals had promised their local Tribes Supervisor they'd keep their tempers with "senior citizens on self-appointed neighborhood watch." Remi tried. He really tried. *It's just another geek. Just ignore her.*

But there were so damned *many* geeks! By the running census on the Net, almost one in four Americans were over sixty-five now. And it felt even worse here in Bloomington — as if oldsters were the *majority*, staking out every shady spot with their electronic sun hats and goggle-scanners, watching from porches, watching from benches, watching from lawn chairs. . . .

It was Crat whose reserve broke as they approached that baleful inspection. Suddenly he capered.

"Hey, Granny!" Crat bowed with a courtly flourish. "Why don't you record *this*!" Roland giggled as Crat swept off his straw cowboy hat to display a garish scalp tattoo.

Merriment redoubled when she actually reacted! A sudden moue of surprise and revulsion replaced that glassy, impervious stare. She actually rocked back and turned away.

"*Astonishing*!" Roland cried, mimicking their least favorite Teen Behaviors teacher at J.D. Quayle High School. He continued in a snooty Mid-

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western drawl. "It should be noted that this small urban band's totemistic innovation achieved its desired effect . . . which was? Anybody?"

"*Shock value!*" all three shouted in unison, clapping hands, celebrating a minor victory over their natural enemy.

Used to be, you could break a babushka's stare with an obscene gesture, or a show of muscular bluster — both protected forms of self-expression. But the biddies and codgers were getting harder to shake. Anytime nowadays you actually made one of them yank back that awful, silent scrutiny was a triumph worth savoring.

"Freon!" Crat cursed. "Just *once* I'd like to catch some goggle-geek alone, with fritzed sensors and no come-go record. *Then* I'd teach 'em it's *not polite to stare.*"

Crat emphasized his point with a fist, smacking his palm. Today, since it was cloudy, he had forsaken his normal Stetson for a plaid baseball cap, still acceptable attire for a Settler. His sunglasses, like Remi's, were thin, wire-framed, and strictly for protection. Nothing electronic about them. They were a statement, repudiating the rudeness of geriatric America.

"Some people just got too much free time," Roland commented as the three of them sauntered near the babushka, barely skimming outside the twenty-centimeter limit that would violate her Personal Space. Some oldsters were gearing up with sonar, even radar, to catch the most innocent infraction. They went out of their way to tempt you, creating slow-moving bottlenecks across sidewalks whenever they saw young people hurrying to get somewhere. They hogged the centers of escalators, acting as if they *hoped* you'd bump them, giving them any excuse to squeeze that police-band beeper, or raise the hue and cry, or file a long list of nuisance charges.

These days, in Indiana, juries were composed mostly of Twen Cen grads. Fellow retirement geeks who seemed to think youth itself was a crime. So naturally, a guy *had to* accept the endless dares, skirting the edge whenever challenged.

"Granny could be doin' something useful," Crat paused to snarl, bending his head to really scrape the zone. "She could be gardening, or collectin' litter. But no! *She's* gotta stare!"

Remi worried Crat might spit again. Even a miss would be a four-hundred-dollar fifth offense, and, despite Granny's averted gaze, those sensors were still active.

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Fortunately, Crat let Remi and Roland drag him out of sight into the Formal Hedge Garden. Then he leaped, fist raised, and shouted "Yow!" pumped by nicotine and a sweet, if minor, victory.

"Patagonia, yeah!" Crat gushed. "Would that be dammit great? Kits like us run everything there, not like here in the Land o' the Old. I hear it's better'n even Alaska, or Tasmania."

"Better for Settlers!" Roland and Remi agreed.

"And the music? Fuego-fire's the only beat that Yakuti Bongo-Cream *can't* meet."

Remi himself didn't care much about stuff like that. He was attracted to the idea of emigrating for other reasons.

"Naw, cuzz. Patagonia's only the first step. It's a *staging area*, see? When they open up *Antarctica*, settlers from Patagonia'll have the jump. Just a hop across the water."

He sighed. "Antarctica. We'll have new tribes, *real* tribes. When the ice melts enough, a few years' time, we'll set it up our way. Real freedom. Real people."

Roland looked at him sidelong. Ever since they'd qualified as a youth gang a year ago, and had to start attending Tribal Behavior Class, his friends kept on giving him looks like that, as if worrying maybe he was actually listening to what the profs said. Or even worse yet, *caring*.

"Real *privacy*, maybe," Roland agreed. "You just make sure *that's* in the Constitution, Rem, if they nom you to help set it up."

Remi nodded. "Dammed right! Privacy! I hear back in Twen Cen . . . aw, shit."

Sure enough, bored with just talking, Crat had gone straight over the top again. With no one in view from this hedge-lined stretch of gravel path, Crat began drum-hopping up and down a line of multicolored trash bins, rattling their plastic sides with a stick, leaping up to dance on their flexing rims.

"*Sweet perspiration . . . Sweet inspiration. . . ,*" Crat chanted, skipping to the latest jingle by Phere-o-Moan.

"*Sniffin' it stiffin's it. . . ,*" Roland countertimed, catching the excitement. He clapped, keeping the beat.

Remi winced, waiting for one of the bins to collapse.

"Crat!" he called.

"Damn what, damn who?" His friend crooned from on high, dance-

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walking the green container, shaking its contents of grass cuttings and mulch organics.

"U-break it — U-buy it," Remi reminded.

Crat gave a mock shiver of fear. "Look around, droogie. No civic-minded geepers, boy-chik. And cops need warrants." He hopped across the blue bin for metals, making the cans and other junk rattle.

True, no goggle-faces were in sight. And the police were limited in ways that didn't apply to citizens . . . or else even the aphids on the nearby oleander bushes might be transmitting this misdemeanor to Crat's local Youth Officer, in real time.

"An aroma for home-a, and a reek for the street. . . ."

Remi tried to relax. Anyway, what harm was Crat doing? Just having a little fun, was all.

Still, he reached his limit when Crat started kicking wrappers and cellu-mags out of the paper-recycle bin. Misdemeanor fines were almost badges of honor. But mandatory-correction *felonies* were another matter!

Remi hurried to pick up the litter. "Get him down, Rollie," he called over his shoulder as he chased a flapping page of newsprint.

"Aw, petrol! Lemme 'lone!" Crat bitched as Roland grabbed him around the knees and hauled him out of the last container. "You two aren't sports. You just —"

The complaint cut short suddenly, as if choked off. Picking up the last shred of paper, Remi heard clipped, rhythmic clapping from the path ahead. When he stood up and turned, he saw they were no longer alone.

Bleeding sores, he cursed inwardly. *All we need are Ra Boys.*

Six of them slouched by the curving hedge, not five meters away, grinning and watching this tableau — Remi clutching his flapping load of paper, and Roland holding Crat high like some really homely ballerina.

Remi groaned. *This could be really bad.*

Each Ra Boy wore from a thick pendant chain the gleaming symbol of his cult — a sun-sigil with bright metal rays as sharp as needles. Those overlaid open-mesh shirts exposing darkly tanned torsos. The youths wore no head coverings at all, of course, which would "insult Ra by blocking the fierce love of his rays." Their rough, patchy complexions showed where anti-onc creams had recently sloughed away precancerous lesions.

Sunglasses were their only allowance for the sleeting ultraviolet,

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though Remi had heard of fanatics who preferred going slowly blind to even that concession.

One thing the Ra Boys had in common with Remi and his friends. Except for wristwatches, they strode stylishly and proudly unencumbered by electronic gimcrackery . . . spurning the kilos of tech-crutches everyone over twenty-five seemed to love carrying around.

What *man*, after all, had to rely on crap like that?

Alas, Remi didn't need Tribal Studies 1 to know that was as far as teen solidarity went in year 2038.

"Such a *lovely* song and dance," the tallest Ra Boy said with a simper. "Are we rehearsing for a new *amateur show* to put on the Net? Do please tell us so we can tune in. Where will it be playing? On *Gong* channel 4003?"

Roland dropped Crat so hurriedly he fell to the ground, breaking the Ra Boys up again. As for Remi, he was torn between a dread of felonies and the burning shame of being caught picking up litter like a Citizen. To walk just three steps and put it in the bin would cost him too much in pride, so he crumpled the mass and stuffed it in his pockets as if he had *plans* for the garbage.

Another Ra Boy joined the leader, sauntering forward slowly, taunting. "Naw, what we have here, you see, are some neo-fem girlie-girls *dressed up* as Settlers. Only, we caught them being girlie when they thought no one was looking."

"Hmmm," the tall one nodded. "Only problem with that *hypothesis* is, why would anyone *want* to dress up like a dammit Settler?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Remi knew Roland had seized the growling Crat, holding him back. Clearly the Ra Boys would love to have a little physical humor with them. And just as clearly, Crat didn't give a damn about the odds.

But even though no geeps were watching right now, dozens must have recorded both parties converging on this spot . . . chronicles they'd happily fax to police investigating a brawl after the fact.

Not that fighting was strictly illegal itself. Some gangs with good lawyer programs had found loopholes and tricks. Ra Boys, in particular, were clever and brutal with sarcasm . . . pushing a guy so hard he'd lose his temper and accept a nighttime battle-rendezvous, or some suicidal dare, just to prove he wasn't a sissy.

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The tall one swept off his sunglasses and sighed. He minced several delicate steps and simpered. "Perhaps they are *Gaians,* dressing up as Settlers in order to portray yet another *endangered species.* Ooh. I really must watch their show!" His comrades giggled at the foppish act. Remi worried how much longer Roland could restrain Crat.

"Funny," he retaliated in desperation. "I wouldn't figure you could still *see* a holo show, with eyes like those."

The tall one sniffed. Accepting Remi's weak gambit, he replied in Posh Speech.

"And what, sweet child of Mother Dirt, do you imagine is wrong with my eyes?"

"You mean besides mutant ugliness? Well, it's obvious you're going *blind,* oh thou noonday mad dog."

Sarcasm gave way to direct retort. "The Sun's rays are to be *appreciated,* earthworm. Mama's pet. Even at risk."

"I wasn't talking about U.V. damage to your retinas, dear Mr. Squint. I was referring to the traditional penalty for self-abuse."

Pay dirt! The Ra Boy flushed. Roland and Crat laughed uproariously, perhaps a little hysterically. "*Got* him, Rem!" Roland whispered. "Go!"

From the scowls on the Ra Boys' patchy faces, Remi wondered if this was wise. Several of them were fingering their chains, with the gleaming, sharp-rayed amulets. If one or more had temperaments like *Crat's. . . .*

The lead Ra Boy stepped closer. "Was that a slur on my stamina, oh physical lover of fresh mud?"

Remi shrugged; it was too late to do anything but go on autopilot. "Fresh mud, or fecund fem, they're all equally out of reach to one like you, whose only wet licks come from his own sweaty palm."

More appreciative laughter from Roland and Crat hardly made up for the lead Ra Boy's seething wrath, turning him several shades darker. *I didn't know I'd strike such a nerve with that one,* Remi thought. Apparently this guy had a lousy sex life.

Some little victories just aren't worth the price.

"So maybe *you're* the manly man, Joe Settler?" Ra Boy sneered. "I guess you must be Mr. Testo, with a stacked stock and hormones enough for all of Indiana."

Here it comes, Remi knew, and foresaw no way to avoid exchanging Net Access Codes with this character, which in turn would lead inevitably

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to a meeting in some dark place, with no Neighborhood Watch busybodies around to interfere.

With a small part of his mind, Remi noted that the encounter had built momentum almost exactly along the positive-feedback curve described in class by Professor Jameson . . . bluster and dare and counterbluff, reinforced by a need to impress one's own gang . . . leading unstoppably to the inevitable showdown.

And that knowledge hadn't helped prevent a thing. Remi wished he'd never been taught any of that shit, anyway. He shrugged and accepted the Ra-worshiper's gambit.

"Well, I'm already man-ugly enough that I don't have to pray for help from a great big gas ball in the sky. Though I must say, *your* prayers sure look like they've been—"

Remi realized, mid-insult, that both groups had begun to turn, to face a new set of interlopers in the Hedge Garden. He glanced back along the path, and saw at least a dozen figures in cowled white gowns approaching, slim and graceful, down the center of the path. Their own pendants were much more delicate than the Ra Boys', and were patterned in the womb-like Orb of the Mother.

"*NorA ChuGa,*" one of the Ra Boys said in disgust. Still, Remi noticed the guys in both gangs stand up straighter, taking up masculine poses they must have thought subtle.

Feminine conversation and laughter cut off as the newcomers saw the male gathering ahead. But they scarcely slowed. The North American Church of Gaia hardly slowed for anybody.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," several in the front rank said, almost simultaneously. Even shaded by their cowls, Remi thought three of the leaders heartbreakingly beautiful. Two he recognized from the halls of Quayle High.

"Can we interest you in donating to the Trillion Trees Campaign?" one of them asked. In her open palm, she held out brightly colored leaflet data chips for them to take. Remi suppressed laughter. These were young, naive Gaians if they thought to hit up *Ra Boys* for reforestation money!

Settlers, on the other hand, weren't as ideologically incompatible. More important, this offered an out from an impossible situation.

"Why, yes, sisters!" he effused. "You *can* interest us. I was just saying to my Settler friends here that the tree planting will have to be our very

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first priority when we get to Patagonia. Soon as it's warmed up down there. Yup, planting trees. . . ."

Crat, of course, was still exchanging glares with the craziest-looking Ra Boy. Grabbing his arm in a vicelike grip, Remi helped Roland tow him amidst the gliding tide of white-garbed girls. All the way, Remi asked enthusiastic questions about current Gaian projects, ignoring the taunts and jeers that followed them from the harsh-faced young sun worshipers.

It didn't matter. The Ra Boys could say whatever they wanted. On the scale of coups in gang Tribal Warfare, scoring with girls beat winning an insult match, hands down.

Not that actually *scoring* was likely here. Hard-core Gaian women tended to be hard to impress.

". . . don't you see that hardwood reforestation in Amazonia is *far* more important than planting conifers down in Tierra del Fuego or Antarctica? Those are new ecologies, still delicate and poorly understood. You Settlers are *much* too impatient. Why, by the time those new areas are well understood and ready for humans to move in, the main battle, to save the *earth*, could be lost!"

Anxious to make good their getaway, Remi and Roland nodded attentively until the Ra Boys were well out of sight. "I see your point," Remi agreed. He continued smiling and nodding for the *next* twenty meters or so because of the speaker's heart-shaped face and beautiful complexion. Also, he liked her walk, and what he could make out of her figure under the gown. At one point he made a show of depositing the trash from his pocket in a brown recycle bin, giving the impression litter-gathering was his routine habit, and winning a brief approving pause in her lecture.

He held on even longer, accepting dozens of chip-brochures, until at last she ran low on breath as they passed under the superconducting rails of the Cross-Park rapitrans line. Then, while a gaggle of youngsters in school uniforms spilled out of a train, running amidst and distracting the other Gaians, Remi told her he'd like to see her personally, and asked for her Net Code to arrange a date.

She, in turn, met his gaze with soulful brown eyes and asked him sweetly to show her his vasectomy certificate.

"I'm sorry," she said with sincerity, "but I couldn't be interested in a man so egotistical as to insist, in a world of 10 billion people, that *his* genes are desperately needed for the future. If you haven't done the

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Even *tigers* had more privacy nowadays, in the Wildlife Survival Arks, than a young guy got . . .

right thing for a certificate, can you point instead to some great accomplishment or virtue, to justify clinging to . . . ?

Her words trailed off in perplexity, addressing their backs as Remi and his friends rapidly departed.

"I'd show her something more important than *genes*," Crat snarled.

Roland was only slightly more forgiving. "Too damn much theory, an' not enough experience. Imagine, invading a guy's privacy like that! Tell you one thing, that's one little bird who'd be a lot happier and a *whole* lot quieter as a farm wife."

"Right!" Crat agreed. "Farm wife's got what life's about. There's plenty room in Patagonia for lots of kids. Overpop's just propa-crap —"

"Oh, shut up!" Remi snapped. His face still burned with shame, made worse by the fact that the girl obviously hadn't been aware what she was doing. "You think I care what a bleeding NorA ChuGa thinks? They only teach 'em how to be — *what!*"

Roland was holding up his wristwatch, in front of Remi's face, tapping its tiny screen. Lights rippled, and the machine emitted a warning tone.

Remi blinked. They were being scanned again, and it wasn't just someone's True-Vu this time, but real eavesdropping. "Some dork's got a dammit Big Ear on us," Roland said irritably.

One thing after another! Remi felt like a caged tiger. Hell, even *tigers* had more privacy nowadays, in the Wildlife Survival Arks, than a young guy got here in Bloomington. *The park used to be a place were you could get away from it all, but not anymore!*

He looked around quickly, searching for the voyeur. Over to the south, Citizens of many ages were busy tending high-yield vegetables in narrow strip gardens, leased by the city to those without convenient rooftops. Bean-pole detectors watched for poachers, but those devices couldn't have set off Roland's alarm.

Nor could the children, running about in visors and sun-goggles, playing tag or beamy.

There were other teens around, too . . . though none in sight wore gang colors. The silent, boring majority, students dressed for fashion or con-

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formity, some carrying banners for tonight's game between the Quayle High Golfers and the Letterman Hecklers.

Turning nearly all the way around, he finally saw the geek — a codger this time — leaning against one of the pillars of the monorail line, watching them. Sure enough, amid the bushy gray curls spilling under his white sun hat, Remi saw a thin wire leading from an earpiece to a vest made of some sono-magnetic fabric.

Maneuvering in step, the three boys reacted to this new provocation by striding toward the geezer. As they neared, they made out the ribbons of a Helvetian War veteran on his chest, with radiation and pathogen clusters. *Shit,* Remi thought. *Veterans are the worst.* It would be hard winning any points over this one.

Then Remi realized the coot wasn't wearing goggles! Of course he could still be transmitting, using smaller sensors, but it broke the image, especially when the gremper removed even his sunglasses as they approached, and actually smiled!

"Hello, boys," he said amiably. "I guess you caught me snooping. I owe you an apology."

Out of habit, Crat accelerated all the way to the edge of the fellow's Personal Zone, and even swayed over a bit as he flashed his obscene scalp tattoo. But the geek didn't respond by flourishing his police beeper. Rather, he acted as if he neither had one nor needed one.

"Beautiful!" he laughed aloud. "So artistic. I had a messmate . . . a Russki commando, he was — died in the drop on Liechtenstein. *He* had a tattoo like that one, only it was on his butt. Could make it dance, too."

Remi grabbed Crat's arm when the idiot seemed on the verge of spitting. "You know using a Big Ear's illegal without wearing a sign, tellin' everyone in range you've got one," Remi informed the veteran. "We could cite you, man."

The oldster nodded. "Fair enough. I violated your privacy, and will accept in situ judgment, if you wish."

Remi and his friends looked at one another. This was bizarre. Geriatrics . . . especially those who had suffered in the war . . . hardly ever used the word "privacy" except as an epithet, when accusing someone else of hiding some foul scheme. Certainly Remi had never heard of a codger willing to settle a dispute as gang members would, man to man and away from the all-intrusive eye of the Net.

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"Shit, no, gremper! We *got* you—"

"Crat!" Roland snapped. He glanced at Remi, and Remi nodded back. "All right," Roland agreed. "Over by that tree. You pitch; we'll swing."

That brought another smile. "I used that expression when *I* was your age. Haven't heard it since, though. Did you know slang phrases often come and go, in cycles?"

Still chatting amiably, he led the way toward the designated open-air courtroom, leaving Remi to try to visualize this wrinkled remnant as a youth, once filled as they now were with hormones and anger.

At least they had a war for you to fight, Remi thought bitterly. After the Helvetian Holocaust, the frightened international community finally acted to prevent any more big ones. But that didn't seem like much of a solution to Remi. The world was going straight to hell anyhow, no detours. So why not do it in a way that was at least honorable and interesting?

Do not go gently, into that good night. . . . Poetry class was just about the only one Remi really liked. *Yeah. Back before Twen Cen, there were guys who had it right.*

From a grassy step near the tree, they could look out over much of downtown Bloomington, a skyline still dominated by preserved Twen Cen towers, though several of the more recent, slablike 'topias canted like ski slopes to the north. From somewhere beyond the park boundaries could be heard the ubiquitous sound of jackhammers as the city waged its unwinnable war against decay, renovating crumbling sidewalks and sewer pipes originally designed to last a hundred years . . . back more than a century ago, when a hundred years must have sounded like forever. Bloomington looked and felt seedy . . . like almost any other town, anywhere.

"I like listening to people, watching people," the codger said as he sat cross-legged before them, displaying a surprising limberness.

"So what?" Roland shrugged. "*All* you geeks listen and watch. *All* the time."

The old man shook his head. "No, *they* stare and record. That's different. They try to compensate for their failing bodies by waging a war of intimidation against youth.

"Oh, it started as a way to fight street crime — retired people staking out streets with video cameras and crude beepers. And the Seniors' Posse really worked, to the point where perps couldn't steal anything or hurt

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anybody in public anymore without getting caught on tape.

"But after the crime rate plummeted, did that stop the paranoia?" He shook his gray head. "Naw. You see, it's all *relative.* That's how human psych works. Nowadays Seniors — you call us geeks — imagine threats where there aren't any anymore. It's become a tradition. They're so busy warning off potential trouble, challenging threats before they materialize, they almost *dare* young men like you —"

Roland interrupted. "Hey, gremper. We get this basic-interaction crap in Tribes. What's your point?"

The old man shrugged. "Maybe pretending there's still a need for Neighborhood Watch makes them feel useful. There's a saying I heard sometime back: *Geeks find their own uses for technology.* it all happened naturally, day by day."

"I wish they never invented all this tech shit," Remi muttered.

The war veteran heard him and sighed. "The world would be dead, dead now if it weren't for tech stuff, my young friend. You want to go back to the farm? Send 10 *billion* people back to subsistence farming? Feeding the world's a job for trained experts now, boy. You'd only fuck things worse than they are. At least in cities, you can be fed, and with less eco-impact.

"But in cities there used to be so much violence. Tech eventually solved that also, and keeps us urban prisoners from dying of boredom. Tech helps people have a million zillion low-impact hobbies. . . ."

"Yeah, and helps 'em *spy* on each other, too. That's one of the biggest hobbies, isn't it? Gossip and snooping!"

The old man shrugged. "You might not complain so much if you lived through the alternative. Anyway, *I* wasn't trying to catch you fellows in some infraction. I was just listening. I *like* listening to people. I like *you* guys."

Crat and Roland laughed out loud at the absurdity of the remark. But Remi felt a queer chill. The geezer really seemed to mean it.

Of course, Professor Jameson kept saying it was wrong to overgeneralize. *". . . because you are gang members, that will color your view of everything. Young males do that when engaged in us-versus-them group bonding. They have to stereotype their enemies, dehumanize them. The problem's really bad here in this part of the city, where the young-old conflict has deteriorated. . . ."*

Everybody hated Jameson, all the girlie gangs and dudie gangs — stay-

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ing in his class only because a pass was required for any hope of earning a self-reliance card . . . as if half the kids were ever going to qualify for *that*. Shit.

"I like you because I remember the way it was for me," the gremper went on, unperturbed. "I remember when I felt as you do . . . as if I could bend steel, topple empires, fuck harems, burn cities. . . ."

He closed his wrinkled eyelids for a moment, and when he reopened them, he seemed briefly to be looking into space and time. "I did burn cities, y'know."

The codger shook himself out of a memory that Remi somehow knew had to be more vivid than anything in his own paltry store of recollections. Remi felt suddenly awash in envy.

"But then, each generation's got to have a cause, right?" the oldster continued. "*Ours* was *ending secrecy*. It's why we fought the bankers, and the bureaucrats and mobsters, and all the damned socialists, to bring everything out into the open once and for all, and stop all the under-the-table dealing and mega-giga-cheating.

"Only now our solution's causing *other* problems. . . . That's the way things go with revolutions, y'know.

"So when I overheard you guys dreaming aloud of privacy . . . talking about *privacy* as if it were something holy . . . Jesus, how it took me back. You reminded me just then of my own dad! I remember people used to talk that way, back at the end of Twen Cen, until my generation saw through the scam—"

"Privacy's no scam!" Roland snapped. "It's . . . it's simple human dignity!"

"Yeah!" Crat added. "You got no right to follow a guy's every move. . . ."

But the old man lifted one hand placatingly. "Hey, I agree! At least partly. What I was trying to say is that I think *my* generation went too far. We overcompensated against the evils of secrecy — of numbered bank accounts and insider deals — and now you guys are rejecting *our* excesses, replacing them with some of your own.

Seriously, though, what would you boys do if you had your way? You can't just ban True-Vu and the other tech stuff. You can't put the genie back into the bottle. The world had two choices. Let *governments* control surveillance tech . . . and therefore give a monopoly on snooping to the rich and powerful . . . or let *everybody* have it! Let everyone snoop everyone else, including snooping the government! I mean it, fellows. That

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was the choice. There *weren't* any other options."

"Come on," Roland said.

"All right, you tell me. Would *you* let the rich and powerful have a monopoly on secrecy?"

Crat glowered. "Maybe. Why not? At least when they did, they weren't so dammit rude! People could at least *pretend* they were being left alone."

Remi nodded, impressed with Crat's momentary eloquence. "There's somethin' to that. Who was it, said life's just an illusion, anyway?"

"Only most of the transcendental philosophers in history," the gremper answered dryly.

Remi lifted his shoulders. "Oh yeah. That's right. It was on the tip of my tongue."

The old man burst out in delighted laughter, slapping Remi on the knee. In an odd way, Remi felt warmed by the gesture, as if it didn't matter that they disagreed in countless ways, or that a gap of half a century yawned between them.

"Damn," the gremper said. "I wish I could take you back in time. The guys in my outfit . . . the guys would've liked you. We could've shown you some times!"

To his amazement, Remi believed him. He couldn't help but smile. After a momentary pause, he asked, "Tell us . . . tell us about the guys."

The three of them deliberated later, some distance from the tree, as dusk shadows stretched across the park. Naturally the old man left his Big Ear unplugged while they passed judgment. He looked up attentively when they returned to squat before him.

"We decided on a penalty for the way you invaded our privacy," Roland said, speaking for them all.

"I'll accept your justice, sirs," he said, inclining his head.

Even Crat smiled as Roland told him. "You gotta come back here again next week, same time, and tell us more about the war."

The old man nodded — in acceptance, gratitude, and obvious pleasure. "My name is Joseph," he said, holding out his hand. "And I'll be here."

OVER THE next few weeks, he told them tales they had never imagined, even after watching a thousand videos — about climbing the steep flanks of the Pennine Alps, and then the Bernese Oberland, slogging through gas and bugs and radioactive mud,

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digging out booby traps nearly every meter, and prying out the bankers' mercenaries every ten or so. He told them about his comrades, dying beside him, choking in their own sputa as they coughed their lungs out, still begging to be allowed to press on, to help bring the Last War to an end.

He told them about the fall of Bern, and the last gasp of the Gnomes, whose threat to "take the world down with us" turned out to be backed up by three hundred cobalt-thorium bombs . . . bombs that were defused only at the last minute, when Swiss draftees finally turned their rifles on their own officers and emerged from their shattered warrens, hands over their heads, into a new day.

As spring turned to summer, Joseph asked them about themselves. He commiserated over the futility of high school, even under the New Education Plan — which forced on them lots of supposedly "practical" models, but which never did a guy any good anyway. He held them transfixed when he spoke of the way girls *used* to be, back before they were taught all that modern crap about psychology and "sexual choice criteria."

"Boy-crazy, that's what they were like, lads. No girlie wanted to be caught dead without a boyfriend. It was where they got their sense of worth, you see? Their alpha to omega. Wishful thinking most of the time, of course. They'd do anything for you, believe most anything you said, just so long as you promised you loved 'em. . . ."

Remi suspected Joseph was exaggerating. But that didn't matter. Even if it was bullshit, it was *good* bullshit. For the first time in his life, he contemplated the prospect of getting older — actually living beyond the ripe age of twenty-five — with anything other than a vague sense of horror. Now, when he thought about it, the idea of someday being somebody like Joseph didn't seem so bad, after all.

Roland and Crat agreed also, each in his own way. It was the profession of soldiering itself that fascinated Roland. Its camaraderie and traditions of honor. To Crat, it was liberation from the tight structures of urban life.

But Remi felt he was getting something more . . . the beginnings of a trust in *time.*

Joseph was a great source of practical advice, too — subtle verbal put-downs nobody here in Indiana had heard in years, but which would burrow like smart bombs dropped among the gang's foes, only to blow up minutes, even hours, later with devastating effect. One day they met the same group of Ra Boys in the park, and left them all scatching their heads

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in confusion, reluctant even to think of tackling Settlers anytime soon.

Roland began talking about joining the Guard, maybe trying out for one of the peacekeeping units.

Remi began reading turn-of-the-century history on the Net.

Even Crat seemed to grow more reflective. It was as if, every time he seemed about to lose his temper, he'd stop and think what the old man would say.

No one worried overmuch when Joseph failed to show up for one Saturday-afternoon meeting. On the second unexplained absence, though, Remi and the others grew concerned. At home, sitting at his desk-comp, Remi wrote up a quick ferret program and set it loose into the Net.

The ferret came back in under two seconds, having fetched with it Old Joseph's obituary notice.

The mulching ceremony was peaceful. A few detached-looking adult grandchildren showed up, looking as if they would rather be elsewhere. If they had been the sort to cry, Remi, Roland, and Crat would have been the only ones to shed any tears.

Still, he had been old. "If any man's led a full life, it was me," Joseph had said one time. And Remi believed him.

I only hope I do half as well, he thought.

So it came to Remi as a shot from the sky when he answered the message light on his home comp one evening, and found logged there a terse note from Roland.

Our names listed in Program Guide for a Net Show. . . .

"Right!" Remi laughed. The law said anytime *anyone* was depicted, anywhere in the Net, it had to go into the listings. That made the weekly worldwide directory bigger in itself than all the world's libraries before 1910.

"Probably some Quayle High senior's doing a Net version of the yearbook. . . ."

But his laughter trailed off as he read the rest.

It's on a reminiscence database for war vets. And guess who's listed as author. . . .

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* * *

Remi read the name and felt cold.

Now, don't jump to conclusions, he told himself. *He might've just mentioned us . . . a nice note about getting to know three young guys before he died.*

His heart raced as he dialed up the correct Net address, sifting through layer after layer, from general to specific to superspecified, until at last he arrived at the file, dated less than a month ago.

> *The Remembrances of Joseph Moyers:*
> *Epilogue: My Last Weeks —*
> *Encounters with Three Confused Young Men.*

This was followed by full sight and sound, with narration, beginning on that afternoon when they had met, and held impromptu court where the elm tree shaded them from the glaring sky.

Perhaps someone neutral would have called the account compassionate, friendly. Someone neutral might even have described Joseph's commentary as warm and loving.

But Remi *wasn't* neutral. He watched, horrified, as his image, Roland's, and Crat's were depicted in turn, talking about private things, things spoken of as if to a confessor, but picked up by some hidden high-fidelity camera.

He listened, numb, to Joseph's editorial voice, describing how he really felt about the youths who shared his final weeks.

> *. . . had I the heart to tell them! To break it to them that they were never going to Patagonia, or Antarctica! That the New Lands are nearly all reserved for refugees from flooded-out or dried-up catastrophe nations! And even then, there isn't going to be enough thawed tundra to go around. Not enough to replace what's been lost. They dream of emigrating to some promised land of opportunity, when Indiana is their destiny, now and tomorrow. . . .*

I knew that, Remi thought bitterly. *But did you have to tell the world I was stupid enough to have a dream, Joseph! Did you really have to bare it all to everybody!*

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A neutral party might have told Remi that Joseph hadn't really told very many people. It was in the nature of the Net, that vast ocean of data, that most published missives were read by only one or two others besides the author. Maybe 1 percent were accessed by a hundred or more. And fewer than one piece in ten thousand ever had enough viewers worldwide to fill even a good-size meeting hall.

Perhaps all that had gone through Joseph's mind when he made this his last testament... that it would be seen by only a few old men like himself, and never come to his young friends' attention. Perhaps he never understood how far ferret tech had come, or that someone else might use the directories better than he ever imagined.

Remi knew it wasn't very likely Joseph's memoirs would work their way up, through good reviews and word of mouth, to best-seller status. But that hardly mattered. It *could* happen, after all. Joseph had been careless with a trust. For all the old man knew, Remi's nonchalant ramblings and dreams might be sifted and pored over by a million voyeurs, or more!

"*Why*, Joseph," he asked aloud hoarsely. "*Why?*"

Then another face came on screen, with delicate features framed in white. It was a voice Remi had managed to purge from memory — until now.

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I'm sorry, but I just couldn't be interested in a man so egotistical as to insist, in a world of 10 billion people, that his *genes are desperately needed for the future. If you haven't done the right thing for a certificate, can you point instead to some great accomplishment or virtue . . . ?*

Remi picked up the unit and screamed as he threw it through the breaking glass of his bedroom window.

Strangely, Roland and Crat didn't seem to see what he was so upset about. Perhaps, for all their stylish talk, they didn't really understand privacy, not really.

They worried, though, over his listlessness, and learned not to speak of Joseph when each of them received small royalty checks in their accounts, for their parts in what was fast becoming a small-time social-documentary classic. They spent their shares on their new, diverging interests, while Remi took his out in cash and gave it to the next NorA ChuGa he met . . . for the Trillion Trees.

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And so there came a day when he encountered, once again, a small band of Ra Boys in the park, this time without his friends, without anybody but his loneliness. His questions.

This time the odds mattered not at all. He tore them up, top to bottom, using sarcasm as he might a slug rifle, treating them as he might have done the Gnome mercenaries, had he been born in a time when there was honorable work for soldiers, when there was an evil that could be grappled with.

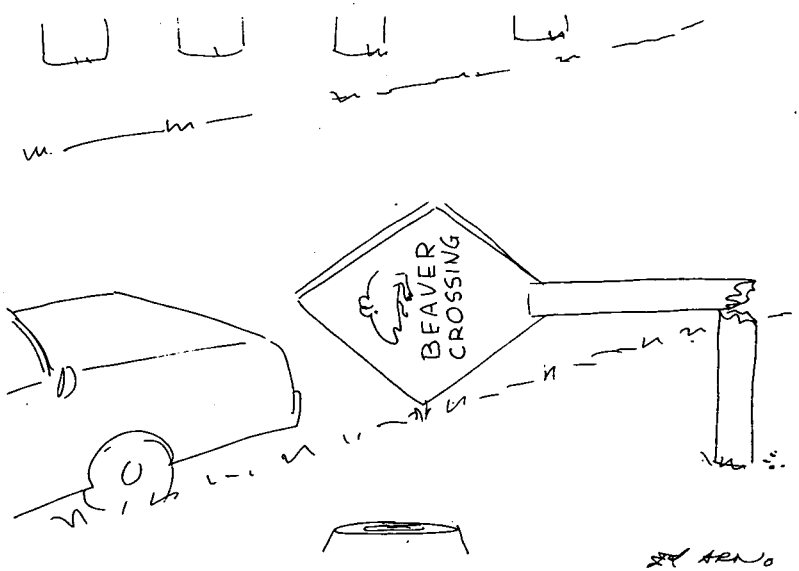
To the Ra Boys' amazement, it was *he* who demanded to exchange Net Codes. It was he who issued the challenge for a rendezvous.

They understood, however, by the time Remi actually met them later, in the darkness behind the monorail tracks. By then they'd done their own research in the Net, and understanding made sure their greeting was subdued, respectful.

Their champion bowed to him as they faced off within the makeshift arena. He even held back his best tricks, letting Remi draw honorable blood before it was time. Then, dutifully, one tribesman to another, he gave Remi what he wanted. And for weeks afterward, the Ra Boys spoke his name in honor under the Sun.

The Sun, they said, was where at last he had settled.

The Sun was the final home of warriors.



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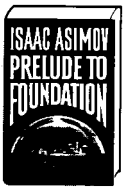

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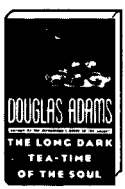

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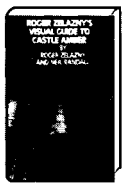

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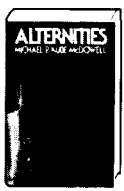

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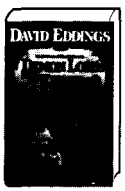

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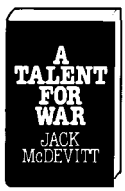

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